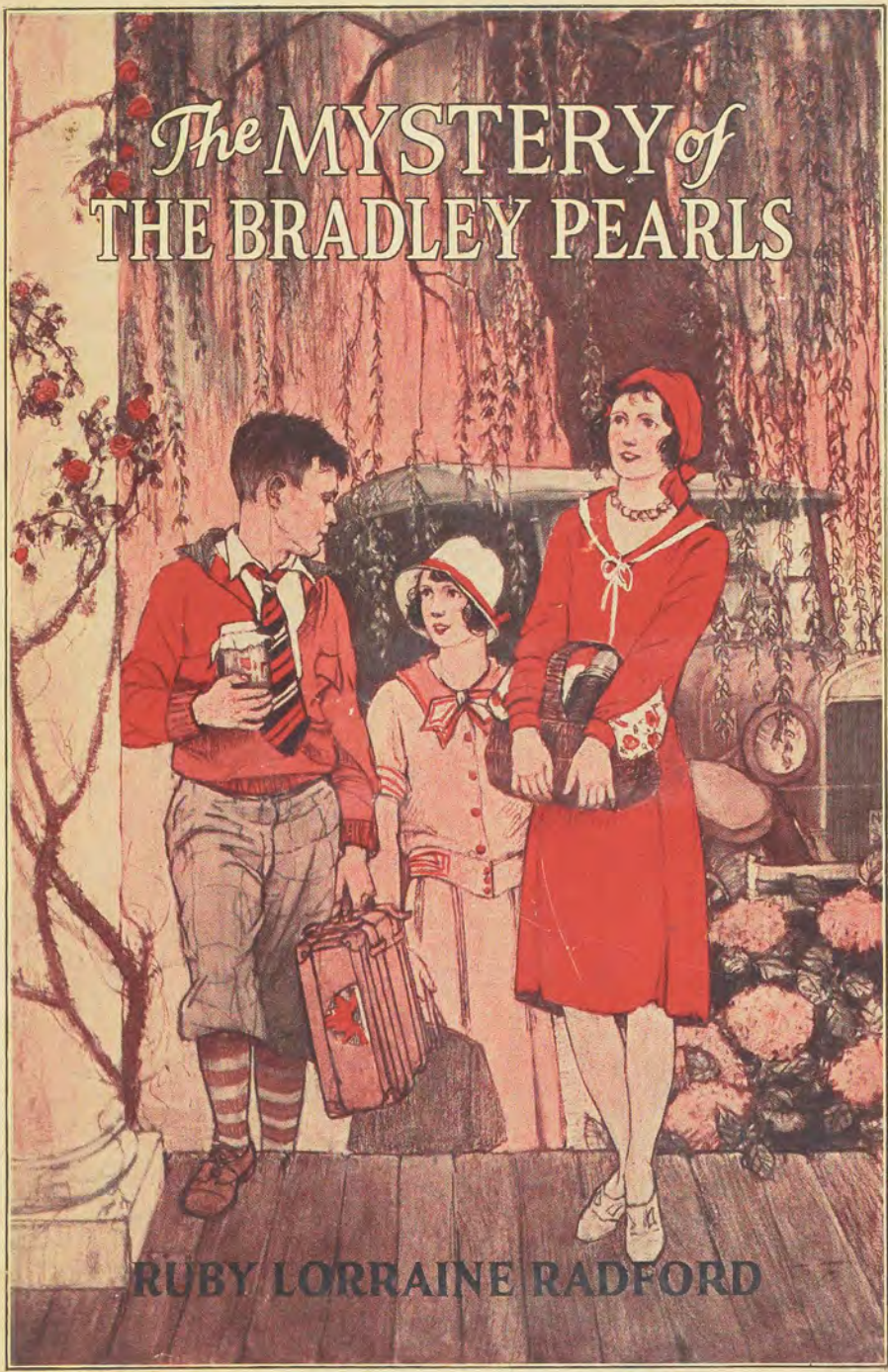
The MYSTERY of
THE BRADLEY PEARLS
RUBY LORRAINE RADFORD

THE MYSTERY OF THE BRADLEY PEARLS

Anne Bradley is willed an old house on the Carolina Coast which is supposed to contain the valuable Bradley pearls hidden at the time of the Civil War. Anne and her friends take possession and find much mystery and excitement in the fact that an Englishman and an Indian prince are evidently on the trail of the pearls. Eventually Anne finds the pearls in an old sun dial and the Indian prince gives her a handsome price for them.

"Ah Ain't Never Been Near Dat House!"

SINCLAIR
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THE MYSTERY
OF THE
BRADLEY PEARLS

By

RUBY LORRAINE RADFORD

Author of
"The Mystery of Adventure Island," etc.

Frontispiece by

NORA SWEENEY

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To
Laura Pauline Radford

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THE MYSTERY OF THE BRADLEY PEARLS

CHAPTER I

ANN'S LEGACY

HUMMING a few bars from the song she had just practiced, Ann slipped her key in the lock. How delighted everyone would be at her prospect of singing over radio! With buoyant stride she was taking the stairs two at a time when the upper hall door burst open and the boys swept out like a whirlwind.

"You wait—I'm going to tell her!" cried Rollie. "The mail man gave the letter to me!"

"But I saw Ann coming first! Aw, cut it out!" John snapped at his younger brother as Rollie caught him by the back of the shirt. There was a ripping sound as the sleeve and back parted company. John caught the rail to keep from losing his balance and the letter fell from his hand to the hall below.

"Wait a minute! What's all this about?" Ann wanted to know. She backed against the wall to keep from being struck by flying heels and waving arms, but made no attempt to interfere with the conflict; she had witnessed them before.

There was no answer as each boy tried to swing over the banisters to get the letter. John was hanging precariously over the side and Rollie had mounted to the rail when Mrs. Reynolds appeared in the living room doorway.

"Oh, boys," she pleaded in distress, "have you forgotten so soon?"

To Ann's astonishment these words had magic effect. John pulled himself over the banisters. Rollie moved two steps nearer his mother and said in contrite tones, "Oh, Mumsy, we forgot—honest."

"If Rollie hadn't grabbed my shirt there wouldn't have been any noise," grumbled John.

Ann viewed this scene in amazement. When the boys were in physical combat her mother generally had to speak at least three times before they even became aware of her voice. But the moment she looked at her mother's pale, tired face

she thought that something terrible must have happened.

"Mother, what is it?" she asked, hurrying to the upper hall. "You look sick—worn out!"

"Sick at heart, I guess," admitted Mrs. Reynolds, dropping wearily to a chair by the hall window. Now Ann saw that her lips were white and her eyes clouded with anguish.

"What's happened?" Ann put her music folder on the hall table, then took off her tight little hat and brushed back damp, auburn hair from her forehead. The sultry heat of the June afternoon made the little upper flat almost unbearable.

"Your father—the doctor brought him home right after you left. I've realized the break was coming. The strain of pulling his business through the financial pressure of these last few months has been too hard—and—and I guess he doesn't get much rest and relaxation at home."

"But what does the doctor say? What's the trouble? What can we do?" Ann burst forth with her questions without waiting for any one to be answered.

"His heart—strain from too much work and

worry, I guess. Dr. Nelson says two months ought to put him on his feet again if he can have absolute rest and quiet." Mrs. Reynolds brought out the last words as though such a condition in their apartment were an utter impossibility.

"Oh, Mother, how terrible!" breathed Ann. Though Mr. Reynolds was only her stepfather, she remembered no other father and had always loved him as her own. For a moment only his suffering filled her mind, then slowly she began to realize what this illness meant to the whole family. They had scarcely been able to make ends meet when he was working regularly every day, and now how were they to exist?

"Maybe I can get some work to do during the summer," she suggested. She saw music lessons vanishing, when she had so needed two weeks of extra practice to fit her for the broadcasting program.

"And we could find jobs, too, delivering groceries—or something," added John.

"But you've got to make up that mathematics if you expect to enter high school in the fall," Mother reminded him wearily.

"You ought to've studied harder last spring,"

Rollie taunted, " instead of always foolin' with those old goldfish and tadpoles."

For the first time since his failure to pass in mathematics John seemed to feel conscience-stricken. The worn toe of his right shoe bored at a ragged spot in the rug, and he made no retort to Rollie. Suddenly he withdrew his hands from the depths of his pockets and with a gesture of abandon exclaimed, " Mumsy, I could sell my aquarium. Mr. Miller down at the seed store offered me twenty-five dollars for it as it stands."

" But children, it's not money that we need so badly, though heavens knows we'll have to watch every penny. Your father has a sick benefit policy that will keep us—at least from being hungry. But it's the chance for absolute quiet that he must have in order to get well."

Though Mrs. Reynolds said no more than that they all knew what she meant; that quiet in a second-story apartment with two boys of twelve and fourteen was almost an impossibility. A constrained silence fell over the little group. John sat down in a chair by the table and leaned forward pressing his palms over his ears, a habit he had when he felt self-conscious and miserable.

Rollie idly turned the pages of a book on the table as he awaited developments.

"Maybe you could take Dad away somewhere," suggested Ann vaguely.

"But summer resorts are so expensive, and you know how your father loves home. I'm sure he would get well quicker at home than anywhere else ——"

Mrs. Reynolds ended on a high note, and they all knew what the unspoken part of her sentence implied.

"We couldn't help being born," grumbled John, his head buried deep in awkward, grimy palms.

Suddenly the welling tears in Mrs. Reynolds' eyes ran down her cheeks. "Oh, John, don't talk like that!" she exclaimed. "I know it's hard for boys to hold themselves down when vacation has just started, but your father must have quiet. I explained all that to you both."

"There wouldn't have been any fuss if John hadn't snatched that letter and tried to tell Ann first. The mail carrier gave it to me," argued Rollie.

"What letter?" asked Ann, eager for any-

thing to slacken the tension that had tightened her nerves almost to the snapping point.

"A big letter from Oakdale with a lawyer's name in the corner," John burst forth with sudden animation, then shot Rollie a triumphant look as much as to say, "There, I told her first!"

"Oakdale? Where's that?" asked Ann.

"A town on the Carolina coast where your father's family lived before the war," replied Mrs. Reynolds. "That's why we thought the letter might be important."

During this interval the boys had been looking at each other like two game cocks, each daring the other to make the slightest movement toward the lower hall where the letter lay. And as Ann exclaimed, "Oh, how thrilling! Let's see what it's all about," the irrepressible boys made a concerted dash for the head of the stairs.

They had not reached the top step before Mrs. Reynolds' low, commanding voice brought them to an abrupt halt, "Stop right there! I'll go down for the letter myself."

"Now see what you did," grumbled John as he sneaked back to his chair.

Tense silence reigned while Mrs. Reynolds

trudged down the stairs and returned with the letter that had caused such dissension. Ann's hands were shaking a little as she took the long, bulky envelope, bearing six cents postage and the postmark of the little Carolina town. It was addressed to Miss Ann Elizabeth Bradley in thin shaky script. John and Rollie, forgetting enmity, were bending close together over the table as Ann took out a thick, seal-stamped document.

"Jimminy Christmas! It's a will!" cried Rollie, whose quick eyes saw instantly the meaning of the typewritten page.

"But who would be willing me anything?" Ann wanted to know in an incredulous, mystified tone. "I don't know a soul in Oakdale."

"There it is—signed at the bottom—Miss Hannah Whitmore," said Rollie, pointing to the bottom of the page.

"Who's she? There're not any Whitmores in our family," stated John.

"Wait a minute—wait a minute! Let's read it quietly," said Ann, pushing off the boys, who were lolling all over her in their eagerness to get the meaning of the document.

"Read it aloud, Ann," said her mother, and

her voice betrayed her curiosity and interest, too.

Ann began reading in a hurried, excited voice:

"'KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS, That I, Hannah Whitmore, of Brigton County, South Carolina, being of sound and disposing mind and memory, do hereby make, publish and declare this as my last will and testament, hereby revoking all other wills hitherto made by me.

"'*Item One*

"'All of my property, situated southwest of the marshes in Oakdale, Brigton County, South Carolina, I give, devise and bequeath to Ann Elizabeth Bradley, absolutely and in fee simple.

"'*Item Two*

"'I also give, devise and bequeath to Ann Elizabeth Bradley all my household furniture and personal effects, and designate the above-mentioned Ann Elizabeth Bradley as the rightful owner of the Bradley pearls, and any other valuables which may be found on the estate. Said property having been owned by one Captain William Bradley before the war between the states, I now return it to the rightful heir, Ann Eliza-

beth Bradley, the only living descendant of Captain William Bradley.

"'*Item Three*

"'I nominate, constitute and appoint the said Ann Elizabeth Bradley and Judge Henry Carter as Executors of this will. I authorize them to sell, exchange or otherwise dispose of any property belonging to my estate, without order of any court, privately or publicly, as in their discretion seems best.

"'IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and seal, this 24th day of April, 1928.

Hannah Whitmore.

"'Signed, sealed, published and declared by Hannah Whitmore to be her last will and testament, she signing the same in the presence of us subscribing, and we and each of us, at her special instance and request, signing our names as witnesses in her presence and in the presence of each other.

"'This 24th day of April, 1928.

"'Mrs. Henry Carter

"'Mrs. Lena Simmons

"'Frank Ingram.'"

"Well, what do you know about that!" burst forth John.

"Does it really mean that you're an honest-to-goodness heiress, Ann?" exclaimed Rollie.

"It seems so," murmured Ann, still rather dazed. "If I'm the right Ann Elizabeth Bradley."

"Did you get that about the pearls?" asked Rollie, leaning over the table and reading from the document, "'and I designate the above-mentioned Ann Elizabeth Bradley as the rightful owner of the Bradley pearls.'"

"I never heard of any Bradley pearls, did you, Mother?" questioned Ann.

"Why, no. Your father was not much on talking about the past. He believed that every man should stand on his own feet and not hark back to the deeds of ancestors."

"And it says something about your being the only living descendant of this Captain William Bradley," added Rollie, continuing to re-read the will.

"But how could she know I was the only living descendant?"

"Gee, but you're a lucky kid!" said John.

"But maybe she meant some other Ann Bradley." Ann could not yet believe her good fortune. "Did my family ever own any property in Oakdale, Mother?"

"Yes, I think so—before the war. It's all rather confused in my mind, but if I remember, your father said the family never went back after the war. Their property was seized during the northern occupation. When it was auctioned off after the war the only son wasn't able to buy it back—or didn't for some reason."

"Then I really must be the one she meant."

"Was Captain Bradley Ann's grandfather?" asked John.

"I guess he was her great-grandfather." Mrs. Reynolds took the document and glanced at the name again. "Yes, that's it—Captain William Bradley. He was my first husband's grandfather. But he never came home from the war, and the son who fled with his mother to the little plantation near Oakdale, later came into the southwest and began to make money. As far as I know—in fact I heard your father say positively, that none of them ever visited that little

town again. They felt too badly over losing the old home."

"And now it's come back to me—how strange! I wonder how this lady knew about me at all and found my address."

"There's something else in the envelope," Rollie told her.

"My, I hadn't noticed!" said Ann, drawing out two papers. "They're letters."

"From the lawyer," said Rollie, recognizing the similarity of the envelope address and the letter Ann opened.

The letter was merely a formal note in the shaky, old-fashioned handwriting, telling Ann that Judge Henry Carter was in charge of Miss Whitmore's affairs at the time of her death, and that he was enclosing a copy of the will which deeded her the property. Also if she needed his services in any way she could communicate with him at 611 Bay Street, Oakdale, South Carolina.

The other letter was in a still more shaky hand and almost illegible, but after some study Ann was able to read it aloud to the boys and her mother.

"'My dear Ann Bradley:

"'I never felt that I had any right to this property which my father bought at public auction for a mere song. At the close of the war it should have been returned to the rightful owners. I now feel it my duty to do so. I have searched long and diligently to find if any descendants of Captain Bradley were living, and at last I have located you. My days are numbered and I have willed that the property pass into your hands when I am gone. A rumor that has long existed in this town that Captain Bradley owned a most valuable string of pearls, which he left on this place when going to the call of the south, seems to be without foundation in truth, for I have searched thoroughly for the pearls without success.

"'However, to prevent any complications I have made a specific clause in my will designating you as the rightful owner should they ever be found. I am sorry to leave the property to you so sadly needing repair, but only a dwindling income is mine. Being of Christian character and just nature I hope that the restoration of this property to its rightful owners will again bring back the Bradley estate to its former grandeur.'"

The letter and the will were both two years old.

"Ann, you're rich!" said John in delighted tones.

"I'm not sure," mused Ann, still not able to believe her good fortune. "From the way she writes the place must have been almost in ruins two years ago. But maybe I can borrow some money so it can be fixed up to sell."

"Sell!" cried Rollie. "With—maybe some valuable pearls hidden somewhere! If it was mine I'd go down there and pull every board apart till I found those pearls."

Ann smiled tolerantly at her twelve-year-old brother. "Honey, I guess your imagination is just fired by those wild and woolly books you read. Poor people like us don't stumble on priceless pearls, you know."

John, who had been re-reading the will suddenly looked up. "She mentions marsh. Gee, that would be dandy for fishing and oysters!"

"You would think of that," grunted Rollie in disgust.

Unmindful of the thrust John's eyes became dreamy, and he murmured, "Ann, I'd sure like to go to that house."

"I'd like to find the pearls," put in Rollie.

At that moment they heard Mr. Reynolds calling from the sleeping porch. Mrs. Reynolds rose instantly, the little flush of hope that had brightened her face a moment, vanished. Her three children looked after her silently as she hurried to answer the call.

The new prospect was too dazzling for them to remain depressed, however. Gradually Ann's eyes began to shine and dance. She leaned toward the boys and said in an excited whisper, "Listen, I've a dandy idea!"

CHAPTER II

LOYAL PALS

WHEN Mrs. Reynolds closed the door leading to the sleeping porch Ann added almost gayly, "It is a wonderful plan!"

"Let her out!" urged Rollie, sensing something secretive in his sister's manner.

John drew closer too, and Ann explained, "If I could sell the place maybe Mother could take Dad off to some quiet summer resort till he gets entirely well."

"Sell it!" exclaimed John in consternation. "Gee, Ann, it would be such a dandy place to live—right on the coast and all——"

"And such good fishing!" Rollie imitated John's tone, at once understanding his brother's viewpoint. "Don't you know we mustn't think about anything but Dad getting well?"

"He could get well here if it wasn't for us." John was in the depths of despair. "Sometimes I feel like running away."

" There wouldn't be so much noise if your feet weren't so big and you didn't stomp so hard," Rollie stated.

" Now cut that out," ordered Ann. " You make as much noise as he does when your nose isn't buried in a book."

John paid little heed to his brother's thrust for imagination had taken him again to the old coast house. " But there are the pearls! " he reminded Ann. " We'd never have a chance to find the pearls if we—you, I mean—sold the house."

" Oh, I guess those pearls are a sort of myth anyhow." Ann had given little thought to this part of the legacy.

" The old lady did say she'd looked everywhere without finding them, but I guess old women wouldn't know how to look for lost jewels like we would. I've read oodles of stories about lost things. I bet I'd know where to look," boasted Rollie.

Ann was re-reading the letters that had accompanied the will, and now she looked up, a frown of indecision on her face. " But this lawyer says the house needs repairing. Maybe I

wouldn't even be able to sell it without fixing it up."

"Couldn't we go to Oakdale and see about it?" suggested John, determined not to give up the hope of seeing the old place.

"Oh, but that would be terribly expensive. The Carolina coast must be at least a thousand miles from here."

"You could write that lawyer and see if he would sell it," suggested Rollie.

"I could," Ann hesitated, "but it will probably be a week before we get an answer."

"Gee, I've got an idea!" exclaimed John, bringing his fist down on the table with a thud.

"There you go making a fuss again!" Rollie accused.

"What's your idea?" asked Ann.

"Send him a telegram! Then we'd know at once what to do."

Ann looked at him thoughtfully. "That's not a bad suggestion. I wonder what it would cost."

John had worked at the Postal during the last Christmas holidays and was now proud to display his knowledge. "You can send a ten-word wire that far for seventy-five cents."

"Then I'll do it!" Ann decided at once. "I have a dollar I was saving toward some new stockings, but I'll do without them."

"When you sell that house you can have all the new stockings you want," grinned Rollie. "You should worry about a little old dollar now!"

"But you'll have to pay for the lawyer's reply," John reminded her.

"I hadn't thought of that." Ann sat back in the chair from which she had half risen.

"I've a quarter you can have," offered Rollie.

"And I'll get a quarter," added John. "Jim Todd offered me a quarter for one of my young goldfish this morning."

"Then that'll be enough," said Ann happily. "I can hardly wait to know what we can get for the place."

Rollie produced pencil and paper and after many erasures they finally composed a wire to Judge Henry Carter in Oakdale. "Must sell property inherited in Oakdale. Wire approximate value."

While Rollie went down to the telegraph office with the message, John took one of his be-

loved goldfish from his aquarium, and hurried out to hunt up Jim Todd. They scarcely hoped for a reply in less than two hours, so Ann tried to calm her excited spirits as she went back to help prepare supper. Fairy-like visions of what she would do with the money, floated through her mind while she worked. There would be all the money she needed for music lessons, and Dad could have two wonderful months at some summer resort.

Twinges of conscience annoyed her as she made mayonnaise and mixed a bowl of salad. Perhaps she should have consulted her mother before sending that wire. But Mrs. Reynolds had always leaned on her husband for decisions in such matters, and Ann felt that her father must not now be fretted by any problem they could solve themselves. They had decided not even to tell him about the legacy yet, for the doctor had cautioned them against allowing him to become excited. Ann had spent a few minutes with him on the sleeping porch, but it was long enough to make her realize that his condition was most serious. Everything possible must be done to secure the quiet and rest so necessary for his recovery.

Supper was on the table before the boys returned. Their faces were bright with expectancy. John found an opportunity when his mother wasn't looking to hold up a quarter between his thumb and forefinger, indicating that they would have money for Judge Carter's reply.

Once Ann went to the kitchen for hot muffins, and Rollie trailed after to whisper, " We'll go back to the telegraph office and wait soon as we finish supper, then they won't phone the message. It'll be heaps more fun to surprise Mother and be able to tell her exactly what you'll get for the house."

Scarcely were they seated at the table, however, when the phone rang and the three of them jumped as though they had been shot. Ann realized that a race between the boys was imminent so she said in a voice that failed to hide her excitement, " I'll answer it."

As she went out Mrs. Reynolds said in a mystified tone, " What's come over you two? Ordinarily I can't get anyone to answer the phone."

Ann didn't wait to hear the boys' reply, but hurried into the hall. A wave of disappointment swept over her when she took down the receiver

and recognized Kathryn Carson's voice. "Say, Ann old kid, I'll be by to take you to the rehearsal in my car to-night."

"Your car!" exploded Ann, at this unexpected announcement from one of her best friends. A gurgle of laughter came over the wire and Ann quickly added, "Since when did you acquire a car, Kit?"

"That's a big secret till I see you."

"This seems to be a day of surprises," replied Ann.

"What's that?" asked Kit, sensing mystery. "Say, I saw Rollie hanging around the telegraph office. You aren't holding out anything on me, are you, Ann?"

"I'll tell you all about it when you come by," conceded Ann, eager to be done with the conversation in case the telegraph office should want their line.

She hung up the receiver and turned toward the dining room. Until Kit called she had almost forgotten the community chorus rehearsal, though this was generally a bright spot in her week. Though Ann was not quite seventeen her rich contralto voice of velvet softness and beauty

was in demand for many musical programs. Ann's secret dream was to be more than an ordinary singer. Perhaps the longing for money to secure instructions from more expensive teachers than her father had been able to pay, was one of the underlying motives urging her to a quick sale of the property she had inherited.

The boys looked up inquiringly as she returned to the table. "Only Kit calling to tell me she'd come by for me to go to the rehearsal. If you don't need me, Mother, I'd like to go. I must have more practice before that broadcasting program is put on."

While preparing supper she had told her mother of the chance that had come to sing over radio. "Oh, do go," urged Mrs. Reynolds. "It'll do you good to get out anyhow."

"What was that Kit was saying about her car?" asked John, whose keen ears had caught part of the conversation.

"She said she'd come by in her car," laughed Ann, "but you know Kit—she's so full of pranks! It may be a goat cart for all I know."

"I saw her driving down the street in an old flivver this afternoon," put in Rollie.

"My, I wonder if she really has a car," said Ann, beginning to put some credence in her friend's statements. "I remember her aunt told her in the spring that she had a scrumptious surprise for her if she passed in all her exams—and she did pass!"

Ann had just gone to her little hall bedroom to dress when she heard a car stopping with a terrific grinding of brakes and quivering of joints. From her upper window she saw an ancient touring car at the curb. Had she been leaving a limousine Kit could not have stepped out and closed the door with a greater flourish. As an afterthought she turned around and switched off the bright lights that had been inviting the notice of some traffic cop.

Ann went out into the hall to meet her friend. "Where'd the bus come from?" she burst forth.

"Don't speak lightly of my car," retorted Kit airily, following Ann into her room. "That's the latest model of 1926—unique in that it has a private band. Every joint plays a tune of its own."

"Ah, cut out the foolishness and tell me the

truth," urged Ann, sitting down at the dressing table to powder her nose.

"Well, this is the whole truth—and nothing but the truth—so help me over the fence," began Kit with mock seriousness. "Aunt Emma wanted to go north during the summer, and being of a tight nature that objected to paying storage for three useless months she wished on me the old car during her absence. She doesn't mind if it gets stolen or burned, for then she can collect insurance, which will bring really more than she could ever get for the old bus on a swap or sale."

"Kit Carson! Aren't you ashamed to talk about your aunt that way? It was lovely of her to let you have the car. Only think what fun it will be at camp!"

"Oh, maybe so," replied Kit, a weary note in her voice. In the mirror she examined a tiny freckle on the end of her very fair, dainty nose. She pushed up the waves in her soft golden hair, then turned to Ann, an unaccustomed look of seriousness in her generally merry eyes.

"To tell you the truth, Ann, I don't want to go to camp this summer. The family has gotten

me off their hands that way every summer almost since I can remember. I want to do something different this year—something individual."

" Why, Kit Carson, you ought to be ashamed! I'd give anything for a summer of good times like you have every year, and this year it's going to be harder for us all than ever." Then she told her friend of the serious problem her family was facing.

" Oh, Ann, I am sorry. Gee, I wish there was something I could do! Maybe the boys could come over and play on our place afternoons. We have so much yard."

" Maybe they can. They said something about getting jobs, but John has to make up his math. It seems really terrible to think they're a hindrance to Dad's getting well, but it's true. They'll try to be quiet, I know, but it's almost impossible for boys that age to hold themselves down all the time. And poor John is just at that awkward stage. Why, when he walks it sounds like an elephant moving through the house! This afternoon when I was sitting out on the porch with Dad a blind slammed in the wind and he

jumped as though he'd been shot. That just shows you how ragged his nerves are."

"I wish they could go to camp in my place," said Kit. "Isn't this a funny old world anyhow, Ann? Those who have certain things don't want 'em, and those who want 'em can't get 'em."

"I guess you're about right. But I do want to go to the rehearsal and we'll be late if we don't hurry," said Ann, going to the closet for her hat.

"But I came a half hour early so we could talk," explained Kit, "and you haven't told me yet what your secret was—not about your father, was it?"

Before Ann could reply the front door bell rang sharply then there was a step on the stair.

"I guess that's Floss," said Ann. "She promised to come by too."

"Then we'll all ride up in state," said Kit rather proudly.

A moment later Florence Arlington came into Ann's room. Florence was just opposite to the nickname, Floss, which Kit had conferred upon her when the dark-haired, slender girl had entered their high school two years before.

"Anybody as serious and plain as Florence Arlington needs something to brighten her up and I'm going to call her 'Floss,'" Kit had stated during the first week of her acquaintance with their new classmate, and so the name had become a fixture with their crowd.

Florence Arlington was not pretty. She was too thin for her height, and the dark-rimmed glasses only accentuated her plainness, but she had sterling qualities of character which made her one of Ann's most valued friends. Naturally she wanted to know at once about the car standing at the door. Before Kit had finished her explanations, however, Ann heard the front door burst open and a wild rush of feet on the stairs. It required no great deductive powers to realize that an answer had come to her wire.

"Ann, where are you?" cried Rollie, not yet at the top of the stairs.

She opened her room door to find John halfway down the hall waving the yellow envelope. "Here 'tis!" he cried. "Hurry, we can hardly wait!"

Ann's hand was trembling as she tore open the message, and she scarcely thought of the girls

standing in wonder near by. Her brothers hung over her shoulders as she read, "Real estate in Oakdale dead. Cannot sell Bradley property."

Ann's beautiful bubble of happiness vanished in thin air. If the Bradley property could not be sold what was the good of the legacy?

"Gee, how tough!" grunted Rollie as Ann's hand slipped to her side with the disappointing telegram.

"A dollar and a half gone for nothing," murmured John, feeling that somehow they had been played a mean trick.

"What's the matter?" asked Kit. "Is somebody dead—or something?"

"Oh, not as bad as that," replied Ann, wearily, letting John take the telegram from her indifferent fingers as she moved back toward her room. "An old lady in South Carolina willed me some property and I thought it might be sold to help us through this pinch, but that wire says nothing doing."

"You mean you inherited something, really?" exclaimed Kit, caught by the glamor of falling heir to a fortune. "Was that the secret? When did you get it? Say, Ann, tell us all about it!

You know we'd never let on to a soul if you say not."

Ann sat down on the bed and began an account of what had occurred in the last few hours. Even had she a desire to keep the legacy a secret she would naturally have told her two best friends. The boys came in and lolled over the cedar chest. As Ann talked, Kit's eyes began to snap brightly and she scarcely had patience for the account to be finished before she leaned forward, caught her friend's hand and exclaimed, "Listen, Ann—wait! I've got a peach of an idea!"

The boys rose and moved nearer. Kit's ideas generally were important, but Ann said rather listlessly, "What?"

"Let's all go to that little old country town in my flivver—and if that house can be sold we'll sell it!"

Ann stared at Kit a moment, her eyes opening wider, the tense lines of her mouth slowly relaxing. "That is an idea!" she agreed softly at last.

"Oh, Ann—let's!" exclaimed John. "Only think of the scrumptious fishing!"

"Maybe she didn't mean us," said Rollie, a strained, hungry expression on his finely chiseled face. In the last few hours he had begun to feel that they really didn't belong anywhere.

"Oh, yes I did!" replied Kit generously, without realizing that she was not speaking the exact truth, for she hadn't thought who should go. But now ideas began to spring full-grown from her mind. "We'll all go!" she added, including everyone in the room. "My car will hold five easily—baggage can be stuck anywhere."

"I'd have to take my aquarium," said John half to himself. "Mother couldn't be bothered with feeding fish."

"You would think of that," grunted Rollie in a stage whisper. "Keep your mouth shut or we'll get pushed out."

"Wait a minute," said Floss, who had not spoken one word during all this revelation, "let's not lose our heads with impossible plans. But Kit's idea does seem a splendid one to me!"

"Of course, it's gorgeous!" agreed Ann. "But how're we going to finance it? We'll have to buy gas to get there, and eat, you know."

"It can be done," said Floss quietly. "You know Kit and I were both going to camp. Instead of spending that money at camp we can pay you board while we stay at that old house trying to sell it and we can all chip in together and buy gas and oil for the car, and eat picnic fashion, and camp out nights. There'll hardly be any expense getting there."

"Oh, gee! Ann, let's!" pleaded Rollie. "That'll be more fun than anything I ever read about."

"It would be wonderful if we could," Ann said wistfully. "Then that would solve all our problems here at home—and Dad could be perfectly quiet till he's well again."

"Maybe we could stay there the whole summer and not sell the place till fall, and we could pay you board instead of spending that money at camp," said Kit. "It will be a little like camp life anyhow, right there on the coast."

"And I could pay back everything I owed when I get the money for the house in the fall," said Ann. "If only we can get our parents to consent."

CHAPTER III

THE BRADLEY ESTATE

A DILAPIDATED touring car rattled along in pelting rain. Twenty-four hours of a steady downpour had reduced the red-clay Carolina road to the roughness of a washboard. The worn car curtains afforded little protection to the five weary and dispirited occupants. Four days of hard traveling amid all sorts of unexpected difficulties had taken much of the glamor from Ann's legacy. At least three of them had longed many times for the comfort of home, but never once had the boys thought of turning back, though the rain of this last day had somewhat dampened their ardor.

" That man back there said it was only twenty miles more—and I know we've gone at least fifty," said Kit wearily. She slumped slightly over the wheel. Her damp face was devoid of powder, her hair innocent of curl.

" And it's coming down harder every minute,"

Ann said from the back seat. "Surely we ought to be there soon."

"There's marsh ahead!" suddenly cried John, with more enthusiasm than anyone had shown that afternoon. He was on the front seat beside Kit. There was more room for him and the glass jar of water in which his goldfish were traveling. He was also burdened with the task of keeping the windshield clear with the old-fashioned hand-operated wiper. He now worked it vigorously while peering ahead.

"I smell the salt water and marsh," said Floss, sniffing eagerly. "We're getting there, Ann!"

Instantly all spirits rose. "Is that that funny scent I've been smelling?" asked Rollie, sniffing noisily.

None of them had ever seen the ocean except Florence, and naturally the boy turned to her. "That's it," she replied. "The scent is always stronger when the tide is out. Yes, it's way out now—see?"

Ann ripped away the useless curtain so they could all get a better view of green marshes blending into a misty horizon. Along the road and on points of land extending into the water

wide-armed oaks stood motionless and dripping with moisture. How different was this landscape from anything they had ever seen! The misgivings that had assailed Ann began to slip away. This was a land of romance. Surely much happiness awaited them here.

There was consolation, too, in the thought that Judge Henry Carter was expecting them. The parents of this car-load of travelers had not consented to this journey without much discussion, investigation and deliberation. When Mr. Reynolds was finally told of Ann's legacy he recalled that his firm had a branch fifteen miles from the town of Oakdale. A friend from that office answered letters of inquiry concerning Judge Carter's standing in the locality, reporting that no finer gentleman could be intrusted with handling Ann's affairs.

Finally at the suggestion of Mr. Reynolds' physician Judge Carter was appointed Ann's temporary guardian. "Now you and the judge can go ahead—and sell the house—or do anything you like about it, without having to worry your father," said Dr. Nelson, when they received a letter from the judge, accepting this

responsibility. "After all, Miss Ann, that legacy is of small importance compared with your father's recovery. I tell you all again that he positively must not be excited by anything!"

While these arrangements were being made, other matters had adjusted themselves automatically. Florence agreed to coach John in mathematics while they were away. Ann's greatest regret in leaving home so suddenly was that she could not participate in the broadcasting program. She realized, however, that her father's improvement could not really begin until they were gone, so she tried to forget ambitious dreams.

As for Kit, she had no regrets or responsibilities. And she was the lucky one who discovered that one of their high school teachers was driving across country to Savannah, and was glad to see the touring car of adventurers safely that far. So this solved the last of their problems before starting off.

Since leaving their friends at Savannah in the early morning Ann had really begun to feel her responsibility. She knew that the girls had thrown themselves whole-heartedly into the plan

merely through loyalty to her, and she meant for them to enjoy the weeks they spent in Oakdale. The four days that had passed since leaving home had been sufficient to convince Ann that her task of looking after the boys was no easy one. Every time they were irritating, however, she was glad they were away from her mother and father. There were financial problems, too, that filled her mind during those long hours of riding. Kit and Floss were to pay board by the week, but Mrs. Reynolds could only give her a meager allowance for their own living expenses. Ann would have to plan carefully to make ends meet until the house was sold.

She could scarcely believe that within an hour she would see the old family home. Approaching a fork in the road Kit slowed up, not knowing which to take for there was no highway sign. On seeing a man in knee boots coming up through the marsh muck Kit called out, "Which road takes us to Bay Street?"

"To your right," replied the stranger. "The tourist camp isn't far—left side of the road. You cawn't miss it!"

"But we aren't going to the tourist camp,"

retorted Kit. "We're headed for the Bradley estate."

"Oh, aw, really!" said the stranger unable to hide his surprise. "Then you take the left road and you don't have to go through the business part of town."

"But Kit, we have to go by Judge Carter's on Bay Street to get the key," interrupted Ann.

"Then we take the right hand road as he said at first," said Kit, starting the car again.

"Gee, what a funny brogue that man had," snickered John when Kit thanked the man and drove on. "I wonder if they all talk like that in Carolina."

"That's not a southerner's brogue," stated Floss, who had traveled more than the others. "He's certainly English."

"Maybe we do look like tin-can tourists, but we're headed for the finest old house in Oakdale, old dear!" said Kit airily with a saucy wave at the man they'd left behind.

They passed the tourist camp, and over a road of finely ground shells, entered the little village nestling in the soft shadows of wide-spreading oaks. Never had they seen so many large trees

so close together. They lined the main streets and side streets and overshadowed houses. All of them were festooned in soft, greenish-gray moss that only seemed to make the rainy twilight more dismal.

"Let's pray we can get there before it's too dark," said Kit a little uneasily. "I hope your place isn't as gloomy as that," she added, pointing to an old colonial house set deep in shadows of oaks and palms.

Soon they came to the end of the long road and away to the left was a paved street, following the curve of an irregular bay.

"Look, this must be Bay Street," said John. "I declare if we haven't butted right into it!"

They turned east along the paved road. On the right, green embankments sloped down to the deep waters of a bay, and here, too, oaks gave beauty to the landscape. They passed several blocks of old homes standing in dignified grandeur, behind wide lawns. Then they drew nearer the business district. Opposite a little park was a brick court house. Stores and docks and small buildings rose on the right. Glancing toward the bay at the street crossings they could

see masts of schooners and smoke-stacks of small steamers. Weariness was now forgotten in keen interest.

Ann bent forward trying to make out building numbers in the fading light. Finally she said, "Go slowly, Kit. A number there was seven-twenty. Judge Carter's office should be on the next block."

There was very little traffic. The old car crept along as slowly as was agreeable with its balking propensities. Occasionally it bucked and shivered in all its joints, then Kit would put on a burst of speed to establish equilibrium again. In one of these emergency spurts they rushed by the little building flaunting the number six-eleven.

"Wait! It's back there!" cried Ann, when she could be heard for the noise of the car.

She tumbled out and went back to hunt the number while Kit backed up along the curbing. Judge Carter's office proved to be a tiny, one-story affair. The rear section rested upon pillars whose foundations were hidden at flood tide. There was an alley on each side, as though the

rusty little building wished to remain untouched by the modern structures rising all around it.

To Ann's disappointment the door was closed and no light shone through the soiled window panes. When she was about to turn away a woolly head appeared from the western alley, and stood hesitating a moment close to the porch rail.

" Am you—am you de lady whut Mis' Hannah lebe her house to? " the negro boy faltered at last.

This was so different to the reception Ann had expected that she almost laughed, but only replied, " Yes. Is this Judge Carter's office? "

" Yas'm, an' I he nigger, Nick. But de Jedge am sick. Dis rainy weather always put him in bed wid rheumatics. But he tole me to wait here an' gib you de key to de house."

" Oh, well then that makes it all right," said Ann in relief, reaching for the key as the boy swung over the banisters. She had rather hoped the Judge would go up to the house with them, but, if he was sick, of course that was impossible.

" De Jedge say he sorry he can't be here, but you mus' come down an' see he quick as he git better."

"Of course I will, and tell him I'm sorry he's sick," said Ann. "But how far is Mis' Hannah's old house?"

"'Tain't fer."

John had left the car and now came up the steps to join his sister on the porch. "Which way do you go?" he asked.

"Straight down dis street a piece, den turn into Laurel a few blocks, den straight out Calhoun till you git to Oakland an' den you's almost dere, only it's clean down to de end o' de street."

"Mercy, help us!" cried Kit, who had been listening from the car. "Can we ever find it?"

"Can't you come along and show us how to get there?" asked Ann.

"I could, Miss, only Jedge sont me down to watch de office."

"But do you have to watch any more now that you've given me the key?" asked Ann.

"No'm, dat's right, but I ain't had no supper."

"Ah, come along!" cried Floss from the car. "We have a half box of lunch left over. You can have that if you'll show us the way."

"I ain't got time to go all de way, but I'll ride

on de runnin' board to Oakland Street," Nick finally conceded.

They repacked themselves into the car, and the stubborn little negro added his weight to the baggage-burdened running board. Off Bay Street the paving was of cobblestones, but the boy clinging to the car side seemed an adept at such rough riding.

"You have a queer name, Nick," said Ann, feeling very much amused at the little boy's antics in clinging to the shaking car. "Why do they call you that?"

"De Jedge say Ah's worse'n ole Nick heself. He say mah Maw must 'er named me atter de debil."

On Oakland Street he pointed ahead, explaining, "Now you keep on ridin' till you git to de las' house on de street an' dat's it."

"I guess you'll have to ride along till we unload the baggage at the house," said Floss, who had been rummaging in the dark bottom of the car. "I can't find the lunch box, and we want to pay you."

"I don' want no pay. I can't go no furder," said Nick almost with a whine in his voice.

"But why can't you go on?" asked John. "You've got some reason—I can tell by the way you act."

"I hates to tell you—being's you goin' dere. But I ain't never been near dat house!"

"Never been near it?" cried a chorus of voices, and Kit brought the car to a shivering stop.

"Lawsy, no! Dat house done been hoodooed by heathens long 'fore I wus bawn!"

With this the little negro jumped from the running board and disappeared like a frightened rabbit down the dark street.

"Hoodooed?" repeated Kit, feeling suddenly very let down.

"I guess that's negro dialect for haunted," said Floss.

For a moment they sat there silent, each one adjusting his or her thoughts to this new complication. The car lights made but slight impression through the misty darkness. Nor did the tangled, dense growths of the flower gardens on each side of the street add to their comfort.

"We could camp out again to-night," quavered Rollie, "and go on to the house after daylight to-morrow."

"Camp out a night like this!" Kit exploded. "I'm going to have a good soft bed to-night even if I have to sleep with a ghost!"

"Somehow I wish we hadn't told that Englishman back there in the marsh where we were going," said Floss uneasily. "I didn't like his face."

"Now don't everybody get silly and frightened before we even get there," admonished Ann.

"Gee, I don't believe . . . " but Kit got no further, for someone running through near-by bushes suddenly set them all a-quiver again.

"Say, Miss!" cried Nick who had conducted them this far and no farther, "I forgot to gib you dis letter."

Everyone suddenly slumped in relief. Ann reached for the letter. As she took it the boy added, "De Jedge say it comed yesterday, but he sabed it till you git here. He reckons somebody see he wus your lawyer when de will were publish, an' so sont de letter in he care."

"Thank you," said Ann. "And here's the box of lunch. I found it after you were gone."

This seemed to bring them back to normal, and as the boy turned away again Kit started the car

and presently they stopped at the broken picket fence of the last house on the street. John got out with a lantern and found the gate, sagging half open on rusty hinges. He propped it back and Kit turned into the yard. A weed-grown drive wound toward a dark house about two hundred feet from the street. John went ahead of the slowly moving car with his lantern and presently almost stumbled over the steps.

"Here we are!" he called gayly.

With one accord they tumbled out, and up to the broad, columned porch. They did not wait to take baggage or anything, so eager were they to explore the interior. Through a long hall they passed into a door that stood open at the right. There were no electric lights, but tapering candles on the mantel soon dispelled some of the gloom.

"It's certainly a very old, interesting place," said Floss, looking about with appraising eyes, "but it doesn't look especially haunted."

"Why bring up unpleasant subjects?" asked Kit, swallowing suddenly.

"Let's see what the kitchen and dining room are like," suggested John, leading with the

lantern through the rear door. "Don't forget we haven't had supper yet."

"Wait a minute, John, with that bright light. I'm curious to see what this letter's about," said Ann. "Maybe it's somebody offering to buy the place already."

John moved closer while she opened the letter. The typewritten note was so brief that she read it at a glance, then cried out to the girls who were on the opposite side of the room, "For goodness sake! Will you listen to this?"

Everyone moved closer as Ann read, "If you care to sell the Bradley pearls I should like to have an option on them. Address P. O. Box 380, Oakdale."

"Jimminy Christmas!" Rollie fairly exploded. "Didn't I tell you the pearls would prove the most valuable thing about this legacy?"

"But where are they?" asked Kit of no one in particular. "Who knows anything about the pearls?"

"Maybe Judge Carter can tell us something to-morrow," said Ann hopefully.

Floss who had been looking over Ann's shoulder at the note now said in a mystified tone,

"But there's no name signed. Whoever heard of writing such a note as that, anonymously?"

"Whatever that is, I'm glad he wants to buy them," said John. "If Ann can sell the pearls she can keep the house. Gee, but that would be bully!"

"But who wants a hoodooed place?" Rollie shivered, and looked scornfully at John.

"That's the best part," stated Kit. "Think of owning a place all chug-full of mystery like this!"

"Ann, you really wouldn't want to sell it, if there're some pearls hidden here," said Floss.

"There's so much to think about I don't know what to think," Ann laughed suddenly. "But maybe the Judge can help straighten me out to-morrow."

CHAPTER IV

THE VILLAGE GOSSIP

No one slept very soundly in the old Bradley house that first night. While they were eating supper, hastily prepared on the rusty stove, rain began to pour in torrents again. This seemed only to increase the gloom and isolation of the dilapidated house. On going to the second floor to select sleeping quarters they found the roof leaking in a half dozen places.

Ann's heart sank at this discovery. They could not stay even a few weeks without having some repairs made, and she had very little beside actual living expenses. And other problems were bobbing into her mind since receiving that anonymous note. Would she not be foolish to sell the house? Perhaps she might find the Bradley pearls even though Miss Hannah's search had been in vain. The vaulted walls and antique furniture suggested a thousand hiding places.

When they were inspecting the five rooms on

the second floor Kit said, " This would make a dandy place for summer campers. Most of these rooms are big enough for two double beds or several cots."

" I guess Captain Bradley wouldn't have tolerated a bunch of rowdy campers," said Floss, examining the beautifully carved mantel. " You can tell he was a person of fine tastes."

" They must have had crowds here all right," Ann said. " These old families entertained in royal fashion before the war."

" But the war just about ruined this town," said Rollie. " I read all about it in the library back home. The northern fleet sailed into the harbor, and all the southern people left, and their homes were turned into hospitals and officers' headquarters."

" I wonder if this house was occupied," mused Kit.

" It must have been," Ann told her. " Mother said the family didn't come back here after the war. I'll try to remember to ask Judge Carter all those things to-morrow."

While the little group stood in the middle of the room talking and speculating, John threw

open the rear blinds and peered into the rainy darkness. "I'd like to have this room," he said, after a time. "I think that's marsh or the sea out there."

"If we sleep up here we'll have to find spots between the leaks," said Ann. "Look, it's dripping right down on the foot of that bed. I hope we can find a couple of dry mattresses in the whole house."

But they were all so tired they cared little where they slept. Finally the three girls decided to sleep cross-ways on a huge four-poster in a front room that was drier than any of the others. The boys, determined to sleep in the room John had selected, pushed the bed into a corner and found a dry mattress to replace the soggy one.

Long after the others were asleep Ann lay thinking over her many problems. But weariness at last stilled her thoughts and she did not rouse until sunshine lay in latticed bars on her bed. Instantly she was wide awake, feeling more hopeful than during all the previous day.

When she was dressed, a glance into the boys' room revealed an empty bed. Would wonders never cease! At home they almost had to be

dragged out. From the back window she saw heads bobbing about in the tall grass. She hurried down-stairs to put on breakfast, for she wanted to be at Judge Carter's office when it opened. As she passed through the lower rooms she raised sashes and opened shutters wide. How much would have to be done to make the place clean and homelike!

Before breakfast was on the table she heard the girls moving about up-stairs, and presently the boys came bounding in from the back yard, their cheeks flushed, their hair rumpled with the marsh wind.

"Oh, Ann, we've found just the place for John's fish pond," said Rollie eagerly.

"Right at the edge of the marsh," explained John, "in a little hollow. In almost no time we can scoop it all out and cut a channel so the high tide will flood it."

"But you can't put your goldfish and those others you brought from home in salt water."

"Gee, I'm not that dumb!" exploded John. "I'll have a fresh water pool for them higher on the lawn. But that'll be a big fish pond down

by the marsh, filled with every sort of fish I can find."

"Well, don't make too many plans," said Ann. "Remember we may not stay long."

"But gee! You aren't going to sell with a valuable string of pearls hidden somewhere, are you?" asked John. "Only think of that man offering to buy 'em without even seeing 'em. You know they must be valuable!"

"I guess I don't know anything about this legacy," laughed Ann. "It seems to become more shrouded in mystery every day. Why that old lady should have left it to me in the first place is more than I know."

"I'll bet Judge Carter can tell you heaps," Rollie said.

"And I'm going to see him the minute I finish breakfast," said Ann.

The girls came in just as Ann's last words were spoken and Floss said, "Kit and I've been talking things over. We're going to take charge of the housekeeping for a while—at least till you get things straightened out—the business, I mean. So the minute we finish breakfast you take the flivver and go down to Judge Carter's."

"But I can't leave the housework to you like that," Ann objected. "Remember, you're my boarders!"

"We're your pals and friends," put in Kit with vehemence. "We came down here to see you through this affair, and we aren't going to do it from the grandstand. We're in the game with you to the finish!"

"And I guess you're about the best pals a girl ever had," said Ann, deeply touched by this expression of loyalty.

Ann was again destined to disappointment when she drove down to the little office on Bay Street. Judge Carter's door was still closed. As she stood on the porch an elderly gentleman who was passing, hesitated, finally lifted his hat and said, "Good morning. If you're waiting for the judge I reckon he won't be down to-day. He's in bed with rheumatism."

Ann thanked him and turned back to the car. What a little town Oakdale was! Everybody seemed to know everybody else's business. The incident made her recall, however, a warning her father had given before she left home.

"Be sure to deposit what money you have,"

he had told her. "You don't want to tempt thieves by keeping cash in the house. And you know in a little town nobody's business is private."

Ann now knew that her father was right. She drove at once to the bank on the corner and opened an account, reserving only enough cash to buy a week's groceries. Next she hunted up a lumber company to make arrangements about having the roof patched.

"So you've come to live in Captain Bradley's old house," commented the man in the lumber office to whom Ann explained her needs.

Ann told him that she had, then shut her lips tightly. These villags gossips would get nothing out of her.

"Then I reckon you're Miss Ann Bradley. Everybody's sure glad the place has gone back to the family. But I reckon none of us was figurin' on such a young person as you comin' down and fixin' it up."

So their affairs were going to be watched by the whole community, thought Ann. After all this man might know much about the old estate that was interesting, but Ann had no intention of

encouraging his prying by asking questions herself, so she merely repeated her request, "Can you send a man up right away to see about the roof? I want it fixed before another rain."

"I've a jobber here right now who can go along and see about patchin'. But you'd better let us put on a new roof. I reckon that house ain't been covered in thirty years."

"Oh, I can't afford a new roof." Ann flushed as she made the confession. She was thoroughly provoked that he had forced the truth from her. "Can the man go along as I go back? I'm anxious to have the work done at once."

A few minutes later Ann was rattling along down Bay Street with Jim Dawkins, the jobber. He was a little dark-skinned, clean-shaven man, who might have been anywhere between thirty and fifty. But whatever his age he had all the gossip of Oakdale on the tip of his tongue.

"You must be mighty brave to come down and take possession of that old place," he said before they were fairly seated.

"Oh, I'm not alone," replied Ann with meaning emphasis. "My brothers are with me, and two friends. Last night we had a hard time

finding a dry place to sleep. The roof leaks like a sieve."

"And no wonder," grunted Jim Dawkins. "Miss Hannah hasn't spent a cent on it in years. She hadn't any money, though, poor soul. But she might've made a good livin' takin' boarders in that big house. In her last years she was always so scared somebody would stumble across them pearls that she got so she'd hardly let people in the front door. Why, she even made the delivery boy leave her groceries in that little covered box near the gate. And she kept the house shut so tight, I reckon the same air's in there that was there before the war."

Ann laughed and suddenly she determined to learn all she could from this gossip. "Then it's a shame she didn't find them," she said.

"She didn't, eh?" exclaimed Jim, unable to hide his surprise and curiosity. "But the will published in the paper said she willed everything to you, includin' the Bradley pearls."

Ann hesitated a moment, then decided that nothing would be lost by telling the truth. "But she wrote me a note, saying she'd hunted everywhere for the pearls without finding them."

"She did, eh? Well, well! You know sometimes we thought she'd found them pearls and then again we wasn't sure. She was a queer soul, but she wouldn't have no reason for lyin' to you when she was dyin'. Law, but she give us the surprise of our lives when she willed that place to a total stranger, after them women in the missionary society had been caterin' to her fer years! How I did laugh when I heard of it!"

"It couldn't have surprised anyone more than me," Ann admitted. "I never saw her—or even heard of her in my life. I can't imagine why she did it."

"Some said she never felt like her Pa had any right to the house."

"But they certainly had a right to it," said Ann, "if they bought it."

"They bought it all right—but not from Captain Bradley. You know durin' the war this town was took over by the northern forces, and all the people livin' here left. Captain Bradley went off to fight. His wife and son went upriver to the plantation." Suddenly Jim paused and turned in surprise toward the girl, adding,

"But how come you don't know all this since your family was so hard hit?"

For a moment Ann regretted that she had let the conversation go so far, but it was too late. At least she could find out from Jim Dawkins all the gossip being passed around Oakdale.

"I did know that Captain Bradley fought for the south, and that my grandfather moved later into the southwest with his mother, but I hadn't any idea how Miss Hannah got the Bradley home. You see my own father died when I was only six months old, and I'm the only Bradley left."

"But you said your brothers were with you."

"Yes, but they're half-brothers. My mother married again."

"Then I reckon you don't know that at the close of the war the old Bradley place was auctioned off and Harvey Whitmore bought it in."

"Was he Miss Hannah's father?"

"The same—and a hard, common-sense man he was too. He never laid no stress on the tale about Cap'n Bradley's pearls. It was only after his death that Miss Hannah began to bore into every joist and sill lookin' fer 'em."

"Then you think it was only gossip—about the pearls?" Ann exclaimed in sudden disappointment.

"Oh, I wouldn't say there wasn't some foundation fer all that talk. Where there's smoke there's sure to be fire, you know. But there ain't no sense puttin' too much stress on what a dyin' man says on the battlefield."

"What?" burst forth Ann.

"Hadn't you heard about that?" Jim Dawkins came back as abruptly. "Law, child, don't you know nothin' about this affair?"

"Very little," admitted Ann. "Remember I've been living way over in Mississippi. Please tell me what you know."

"Why, nobody had ever heard of the Bradley pearls till after the war when Major Blackwell come home. He tole about bein' with Cap'n Bradley when he was dyin' on the battlefield. The Cap'n tole the Major to be sure and tell Mrs. Bradley about the pearls. When the Major leaned close and asked, 'What pearls?' Cap'n Bradley said, 'A present for her—back home.' Then before the Major could ask anything more he had done slipped into eternity."

"Oh," breathed Ann, feeling suddenly very let down. "And—and nobody knows anything more definite than that?"

"Not that I ever heard of. Of course when Major Blackwell come home with that story it set everybody's tongue waggin', but by that time the Whitmores were livin' in the house and nobody had a right to go there and look."

"Maybe Mr. Whitmore found them and sold them," said Ann, her tone colorless like her vanishing hopes.

"Some thought that, till about ten years ago when a queer advertisement come out in the Oakdale paper—somebody was advertisin' for information about the Bradley pearls."

"Advertising for them!" exclaimed Ann. She thought at once of the mysterious note she had received last night, but kept her own counsel. Who had been interested in the Bradley pearls for ten years?

"Three times the same ad. come out, but as far as I know nobody could answer it. But that was enough to set poor Miss Hannah wild. Her money was runnin' pretty low by that time, and she got all buoyed up with hope. Why, she even

had an architect make detailed plans of the house in hopes of findin' secret closets. They say, too, she even had the weather-boardin' torn loose, cushions of chairs took off, and all kinds of stuff tested for hollow spaces where a string of pearls might be hid."

Ann listened in amazement to this recital. While Jim Dawkins had made her believe that the Bradley pearls were a reality, still it seemed foolish to think she might find them after all these years.

"But she surely must not have found them," she murmured. "The house shows she must have had no money in her last years."

"And you said she wrote you she hadn't," Jim reminded her. "She was a most Christian and honest lady—even if she was a little cracked her last years."

"Well, here we are," said Ann, turning the car into the hedge-bordered driveway. "And please make your estimate as low as possible. I guess I'm about as poor as Miss Hannah."

"Let's hope you're the lucky one to find them pearls," said Jim with a grin as he got out of the car.

CHAPTER V

COMPLICATIONS

At noon Ann called a conference of her household. A few minutes before that hour Jim Dawkins gave her an estimate of the cost of repairs, and she promised to let him know early the following morning if she would have the work done. While the jobber was on the roof the girls walked about viewing the house and grounds.

A high hedge separated them from their neighbor's home on the south. On the northwest corner of the lot were the old slave quarters now fallen almost into ruins. Oakland Street bordered the grounds for about five hundred feet on the west, and to the east and north, as far as the eye could see were vast stretches of marsh and water. Along the banks of the inlets the boys had been exploring since breakfast.

"It's a cinch Mr. Reynolds wouldn't be bothered with noise if you all lived in this house instead of a city apartment," said Kit, watching the boys in the marsh.

"Where'd they get the net?" asked Ann, noticing that the boys were dipping something in the water.

"It isn't a net exactly," explained Floss. "It's a sort of scoop they concocted out of a stick, a bit of wire and some strong cloth."

From where the girls stood they commanded a fine view, not only of the marshes, but the colonial house. Though the old building was now almost innocent of paint, it required little imagination to visualize how it had once looked. The rolling lawn beneath the wide-spreading oaks was weed-grown and unkempt, but in former days it must have been an emerald velvet stretch under well-pruned trees. There were no hedges or thick clumps of shrubbery to the east or north and Ann thought that her ancestors must have loved broad views and wide open spaces as much as she did. But on the west of the house were thick shrubs, rose-bushes and all sorts of plants. These would have protected the house from prying eyes even if the hedge along the picket fence had not grown rank and tall from lack of pruning.

Behind the house a vegetable garden had been

planted in recent years for here and there among the weeds, beans and tomatoes had sprung up voluntarily. Several picturesque palms and yucca bushes had been left untouched in this plot by the gardener.

"I can't imagine anyone using this spot for a kitchen garden," said Kit, who had much of the artist in her make-up. "From here you get the most beautiful view of all across the marshes. This would be an ideal place for a little tea house, or lily pool. What a lovely spot to sit and read in the late afternoon, or to have supper."

Ann's heart sank a little. She realized that the girls were counting on spending the entire summer here. At that moment she felt in a greater state of uncertainty than she had since the property had been left her. She was only waiting till Jim Dawkins finished his inspection of the roof before repeating his gossip to the girls. At moments she almost regretted having talked so much, but the conversation had swept along so naturally.

Jim descended from the roof at last. "When I get to pullin' away rotten shingles mighty near

the whole roof has to come off," he said. "Here's the closest figures I can do the job for."

He handed Ann a slip of paper and turned toward the boys who now came up from the marsh.

"Been diggin' fer clams a'ready, eh?" asked Jim, ever eager for new acquaintances. "I can show you the best places for clams along the whole coast."

"Oh, would you?" asked John eagerly. "But we haven't been getting clams. We found lots of queer shell-fish, though. Do you know the names of all these?" John went down on his knees by the bucket of small fish he had brought home.

Jim was proud to display his knowledge and talked for some time about various fishes found in neighboring waters. He told John how he could catch shrimp, dry them and grind up the meat as food for his goldfish. The goldfish had been transferred to a large tub until the little pond could be built. John had several pure goldfish, two calico fish, a number of small Albinoes, beside his prize Veiltail Moor.

"Did you ever see a Chinese Veiltail Telescope

Moor?" he asked his new acquaintance as they hung over the fish tub.

"If I ever did I never knowed it by that long name," Jim laughed.

John picked up a fruit jar that stood near by and scooped into it his beautiful specimen of Moor fish. Jim's eyes lighted with wonder and delight as he watched the velvety black fish swim about the jar. "Sometimes they're worth fifteen or twenty dollars—perfect specimens," said John proudly, "but this one's too young to sell yet. I got him when he was first born for almost nothing—swapped some rare water plants from my aquarium. Of course I couldn't bring all that stuff this far, but I had to bring the fish."

"Well, there's all the water plants you want around here," Jim told him. "If you're goin' to have a salt-water pond too, you ought to get some of that Eel Grass growing over by Shady Cove. Ducks like Eel Grass and you can entice 'em to your pond that way. Then there's water hyacinths a-plenty."

"But we haven't any boat to hunt those things," said Rollie.

"You're welcome to mine when I ain't usin'

it. I don't go out 'cept week-ends when there ain't much work on hand."

Just then Ann, who had been talking in low tones to Kit and Floss about the roof repairing, came across the yard and said, "I'll let you know early in the morning if I want you to do the work."

When he had gone Floss said, "That'll knock a pretty big slice out of your summer allowance, won't it, honey?"

"I should say," groaned Ann, sitting down on the top step. "To tell the truth I fear I've bitten off more than I'm equal to."

"But who could know the old roof was going to leak like a fish net!" exploded Kit. "And only think what a heavenly place it could be made, Ann! Wouldn't it be marvelous if your whole family could come here to live?"

"Down here we wouldn't worry Dad at all," said Rollie. "We'd only have to come in the house to eat and sleep."

"Now don't start building air castles," admonished the practical Floss. "We'll do well if we help Ann safely through till she gets the property off her hands."

"That's just it," burst forth Ann. "I don't know but what it would be foolish to sell it now!"

"You mean—if you can—remember Judge Carter said real estate was absolutely dead here," Kit reminded her.

"But I heard something else this morning."

"Thought you said Judge Carter was still sick," said Floss.

"From Jim Dawkins—something about the Bradley pearls," said Ann.

"The pearls!" a chorus of voices burst forth.

Then Ann told of her conversation with Jim Dawkins as they drove from town. Floss was the only one who looked serious. "I wish you hadn't talked quite so much to him," she said dubiously. "Anyone can see he's a regular old gossip."

"Yes, I know. That worries me too," admitted Ann, "but still I'm glad I know what he told me."

Kit's eyes were sparkling, and finally she said, "You know I've read so often how southerners about the time of the war put most of their ready money into valuable jewels that would still be valuable when the war was over—and that they

could carry about with them. Maybe your great-grandfather did that, Ann. When he realized the town was going to be occupied by the enemy he sank all his cash in pearls—a present for his wife."

"But she didn't have them, it seems," said Floss. "He sent word back to her about the pearls when he was dying."

"They must be awfully valuable," continued Kit, still caught by the vision of money tied up in jewels. "If Captain Bradley owned this fine old place and a plantation besides you know he must have had plenty of cash."

"That does seem a reasonable idea, Kit," admitted Ann.

"But Miss Hannah had the house and everything in it almost torn apart looking for the pearls. What's the use of our hanging on to any hope of finding them?" asked Floss.

"Maybe they weren't hidden in the house," said Rollie, whose reading of boys' books had revealed to him a thousand unusual hiding places for treasure. "You know lots of times the old southern families hid stuff in holes under smoke houses or barns or something."

"But there aren't any smoke houses or barns here," said the literal John. "And don't think we're going to start and dig up this whole place. Humph! Not me! I've enough to do to dig a nice pond for my fish."

"Well, I'm all for sticking by the place—and not selling it!" exclaimed Kit. "Why only think, Ann, sometimes strings of pearls bring as much as a hundred thousand dollars!"

"I've read of pearls worth more than that," stated Rollie. "Gee, anybody'd be crazy to sell a house where such a treasure was hidden."

"If we only knew for certain that it really was here," said Ann unhappily. "I'd never give up! Imagine what it would mean to us all." Her face brightened as her ideas developed. "Dad could have as long as he needed to get strong and well—and there are all these marvelous grounds and marshes for the boys—and I—I could finish high school here the same as back home, and then maybe study under some of the very best music teachers in the country!"

"And Kit and Floss could spend every summer here with you," put in Rollie. For a twelve-

year-old he was unusually sensitive to the feelings of other people.

"And Jim Todd could come down, too. He'd be wild about the fishing here," added John. "Oh gee, I vote we don't think of selling at all!"

"But we can't stay with this leaky roof, and it'll cost almost twice what I can afford to have it fixed," said Ann gloomily.

"Can't you make it if we economize lots on food?" asked Kit. "I imagine food's cheap here anyway, and John can catch fish—they're good fillers."

"But I haven't any right to starve you out to pay for repairs," stated Ann independently. "You're my boarders and I mean to have better stuff than you'd have in camp. I've got to do something to make it up to you all for sticking by me. Why, I never could have come at all if it hadn't been for you two!"

"Oh, forget it!" exploded Kit. "So far I've had the most wonderful time of my life."

"Isn't it strange that everybody in this town knows about the Bradley pearls and you never even heard of them till you got that letter from Judge Carter?" mused Floss.

"It does seem strange, but I've been thinking back over the facts and it really isn't," said Ann. "You see Captain Bradley had already sent his family to the plantation before the approach of the northern fleet. My great-grandmother knew nothing about the pearls, evidently. You see Captain Bradley sent word from the battlefield that they were a present for her. But his wife never came back here. She was taken sick before the war was over and went to her father's home in Mississippi."

"Where'd you learn all that?" asked Floss.

"Mother pieced it together from some old letters she found among my father's things. She was hunting to see if the pearls were mentioned anywhere."

"But it seems that your great-grandmother would have come back south to straighten out her affairs after her husband was killed and the war was over."

"But she died herself before the war ended without knowing what had become of her husband. Her family then sold the plantation, which was all that was left, and kept it as a trust fund for my grandfather. I don't think he or

my father was ever in this part of the country. They were all rather bitter over what the war had done to the family."

"Gee, who'd ever thought our family would be right in the midst of such a mystery as this," said Rollie, enjoying their situation to the fullest.

"Oh, and there's another thing!" Ann exclaimed. "Jim Dawkins said that several years ago an ad. was run in the local paper asking for information about the Bradley pearls."

"Honest!" cried Kit. "I bet it was the same person who wrote you that note."

"Maybe it was," said Ann. "But anyhow that ad. was what started poor Miss Hannah searching for the pearls again. Jim says in the last years of her life she was actually hipped on the subject and would hardly let anyone come inside the gate for fear they would find the pearls and steal them."

"Well, that settles it," said Kit emphatically. "You don't sell this place, Ann Bradley. We're going to help you find those pearls."

"Whether we stay or not, we've got to have some lunch soon," said Ann. "It's almost one o'clock. Let's get busy."

Two days later the roof was repaired and paid for, and in the late afternoon Judge Carter sent word that he was going to the office the following morning and would like to see Ann. Nick brought the message, but still fearing to enter the grounds of the " hoodooed place " he stood at the gate and yelled until the boys, working at their pond down the slope, heard the call. It was Nick who told John that the " big boss " down at the paper office wanted a delivery boy, and in another half hour John had secured the job.

" Even a paper route will help some," he told Ann proudly.

Ann was setting the table for supper as the boys unfolded the morning paper which John had brought from the office. Generally they quarreled over who should read the comic section first, but to-night John handed it over to Rollie quietly, saying, " You can read that while I see what the rest of my paper is like."

Not five minutes of silence intervened before John suddenly exclaimed, " Jimminy gee! Does it mean this place? "

Rollie threw down the comic section. Ann turned from the table inquiringly.

"Ann, Ann, look at this!" said John, thrusting the advertising section into her hands.

In the first moment of her excitement Ann thought perhaps someone was advertising for the pearls again, but this proved to be nothing so cheering. A glance down a column of that advertising page caused all color to drain from the girl's face.

"What—what is it?" asked Kit, coming in from the kitchen.

"The sheriff of Oakdale is advertising the Bradley place for sale," said Ann wearily.

"What right has he to sell it?" asked Floss, who heard the last statement as she joined them. "Here—let me see."

Ann thrust the paper into her friend's hand. "For back taxes," she said dully. "Miss Hannah hadn't paid her taxes in two years. I guess they hated to sell the house before and take the roof from over an old woman's head."

"Well, isn't that the limit!" exploded Kit, when she had read the notice over Floss' shoulder.

"I thought that legacy seemed too good to be true," moaned Ann.

CHAPTER VI

PLANS

ANN knew just enough about business matters to understand that the sale of her property could be prevented by paying up the back taxes. But what good was such knowledge when she was practically penniless? Thoughts of the pearls bobbed up continuously in her mind. Surely the sale of such a treasure would bring enough to clear up all these distressing conditions. Vain hope! Had not Miss Hannah searched ten years without finding the pearls? After all it seemed her legacy was one she could neither get rid of nor keep.

On the morning after the sheriff's notice appeared in the Oakdale paper Ann was hurrying down Bay Street at ten minutes of nine. It was a glorious June day. The bay, whipped by a breeze, glistened with diamond points of sunlight. Cool, bracing air caressed Ann's cheeks as she hurried along with uplifted chin and light tread. She suddenly found herself warming to

this quaint little town, and wanting to keep the old house on the marsh—almost as much as she wanted to be a great singer, and that had been the big dream of her life.

In spite of reason the Bradley pearls were occupying her thoughts more and more. Surely Judge Carter could tell her something about them. At least she was counting on his suggesting some way out of their present difficulty. She would know better how to proceed after her conference with him.

The door of the little office farther down the Bay stood wide. As Ann reached the porch she heard slow steps inside and was greeted a moment later by the judge, himself. A quick comprehensive glance told her that at last she had met the proverbial southern gentleman of anti-bellum type.

The judge's office was dusty and poorly kept, his desk battered and old, cobwebs draped the corners of the smoke-stained walls, and dirt dimmed the window panes, but the judge himself was immaculate. He was tall, thin, and very stiff in his movements. His clean-shaven chin was slightly pointed and over the straight lips

hung a long gray mustache, which was twisted into the shape of two inverted horns. As he talked his Adam's-apple rose and fell above his wing collar, and his black tie rode up as far as the wings would permit. The collar was much too large; but hating change the judge had continued to use the same size collar, and the same old office in which he had begun his law work a half century ago. He greeted Ann as though she were an old friend. "I was afraid that notice about the taxes would upset you," he hastened to say, when Ann burst forth with her latest and most distressing problem.

"I should say it has!" exclaimed Ann. "Here I've come all the way to Carolina to sell the property, but who will want to buy it with such a debt hanging over it?"

"I can straighten out that matter very easily with the tax authorities. I'll go down and find out exactly what the back taxes are, and a check will adjust the whole thing. You see poor Miss Hannah had no money—everyone had known her for years and the tax collectors hadn't the heart to sell the house while she was living—right from over her head."

"But I haven't any money either!" exclaimed Ann, wondering why he should think she had.

"You could surely get that much from the folks back home, couldn't you?"

"No—oh no! We're in terrible straits financially." Hurriedly Ann told of her stepfather's illness and the condition under which they had come to Carolina. "So you see Dad must not be fretted with one bit of this affair. That's why Mother was so glad you would be my guardian, so everything could be handled legally without worrying Dad."

She paused a moment then continued, "The only way out that I can see is to borrow money, pay up the taxes, and return the money when I sell the house."

At these words the judge began twisting his mustache with stiff, shaky fingers. His Adam's-apple moved up and down twice and finally he said, with an evident effort to break the news gently, "I'm afraid it will be practically impossible to sell that place, Miss Ann—to anyone in this town."

Ann's eyes grew wide, and she blurted out, "Why?"

"For one thing it has this tax debt on it and needs repairing badly."

"But I just had the roof patched—it won't leak any more."

"Yes. I heard about that, and knew it would have to be done even if you stayed there only a short time."

"But couldn't I borrow money on it?" Ann insisted. "Then I could pay up the taxes, and if there's no sale for it later I can turn it in to the people I borrowed from."

"I guess you don't understand the people in this town, Miss Ann. You may as well know the truth in the beginning, for I see you are a practical, common-sense young lady. There's not a banker here who would lend you money on that property—no more than they would lend it to Miss Hannah."

"But why?" asked Ann, mystified.

"I'll try to make it plain," he said gently. "You just admitted that you have no money to pay up the taxes—of course the people you ask to borrow from would realize this and that you had no financial backing. Foreclosure would be inevitable. No southern gentleman is going to

place himself in a position where he will have to take the roof from over the head of a young lady like you—no more than they would take it from an old, helpless one like Miss Hannah."

"But they wouldn't have to foreclose if I sold the place," stated Ann almost impatiently.

"And that's a big 'if.' You'd have a hard time selling the Bradley house, Miss Ann."

Ann leaned forward in her chair, and gazed steadily into the old gentleman's eyes for half a minute before she challenged him for the truth with one word, "Why?"

The judge lowered his eyes, toyed nervously with some papers on his desk, and finally looked up at the girl before him, saying frankly, "Well, I guess you may as well know the truth about this, too, now—and from me, as to find it out for yourself later."

"I try never to be afraid of the truth," stated Ann.

"Well, the old Bradley place—as everyone here still calls it—has for years seemed a place of bad luck. Since the day that Captain Bradley left it, only hardships have come to those who have lived under that roof, but I've always felt

that was because it was taken from the rightful owners. The return of the Bradley family ought to bring good luck again."

"I'm not sure of that," said Ann, with an odd little laugh. "Practically everything has gone wrong since I got here." She wondered if she was beginning to believe these superstitions. With a rather forced smile she added, "Maybe if luck turns I'll find the Bradley pearls and can sell them. Read what was in this note you sent by Nick the other night."

Judge Carter adjusted his glasses and read the brief anonymous note Ann had received the night of her arrival.

"Odd for a note like that to be written without a signature. Sometimes we have visitors in town who do queer things, though. But don't build any hopes on finding those pearls, child! Miss Hannah had every square inch of that place searched. I reckon they were carried away by the northern forces that occupied the house during the war."

"Then you do believe my great-grandfather once owned some valuable pearls?" asked Ann,

clinging to hope in spite of what the judge had said.

" Certainly."

Ann repeated what Jim Dawkins had told her about the pearls, and the judge said, " That's practically all I could tell you, too. It's all hear-say—so I advise you not to bank your hopes on finding a treasure."

" Yes, I know I shouldn't," admitted Ann. " The practical thing is to try to earn that money for back taxes. Will you find out for me how much I owe—there're only about six weeks to get the money together."

The judge rose at once to go to the tax office, and when Ann made a motion to accompany him, he said, " You'd better stay here, child. So many common people hang around the city hall. I'll be back shortly."

What a dear old man, thought Ann, as the judge, stiff and erect, walked down the street. In fifteen minutes he returned to the office and handed Ann a list of accumulated taxes due—four hundred and twenty-six dollars. To the penniless girl this sum seemed a small fortune. How in the world was she to get that amount in

six weeks? Above all things she could not let her parents know of this unexpected complication. Such knowledge would only retard her stepfather's recovery, without solving her own problem.

Ann's heart was heavy as she turned homeward. Perhaps she had been over-confident in what she had undertaken. Could a girl of her age fight through such a problem alone? The next moment she chided herself for the thought. Did she not have four loyal pals to help her? As she turned into Oakdale Street she forced herself to a brighter mood; the others must not realize her discouragement. As she opened the gate at home the boys came bounding toward her.

"Just wait till the others can hear too," she said in reply to their flood of questions.

"Only tell us if you think we're going to stay here," said John, too impatient to wait. "There's no use breaking my back over that fish pond if we're not."

"We're going to stay if I can possibly manage it," stated Ann firmly.

"Oh, boy! That's the way to talk!" exclaimed Rollie.

Floss and Kit were as eager to hear results as the boys, and met Ann on the columned porch. "Let's sit here and talk," said Floss, indicating the shady end of the porch. "Kit and I dusted these old chairs this morning. We may as well enjoy this glorious porch. I don't suppose anybody's used it in endless years."

Ann began an account of her morning visit. On stating the amount of taxes every face fell, only Ann remained hopeful. "But listen everybody—if you'll help me out I believe we can get the money together!" she challenged them finally.

"How?" asked John gloomily, for he had already seen his fish pond vanishing.

"By selling enough antique furniture to raise the money."

"That's a dandy idea!" exclaimed Kit, seizing Ann's hands and pumping her arms up and down enthusiastically. "Why didn't we think of that before?"

"But who'd buy antiques in this old town?" John wanted to know. "You can't walk a block without stepping on history! I met up with Jim Dawkins on the street yesterday and he kept

pointing out things—there's where Lafayette made a speech from the balcony when he visited here—and there's where the northern commander landed when he took charge of the town—and on another corner they had an Indian battle when the settlers first came. Nobody's going to buy antiques here! They haven't got anything else but antiques!"

This unexpected speech from her brother brought Ann suddenly face to face with real conditions, but Kit, her faithful ally, was still hopeful.

"If we sell this old stuff cheap enough people ought to be glad to get it," she said.

"But we may sell the very thing that has the pearls hidden in it," stated Rollie, whose thoughts were more occupied with the pearls than any other part of the legacy. "Remember that old lady even had the cushions searched. She thought the pearls might be hidden in the furniture."

"We wouldn't sell anything with cushions," Kit promised.

"Pearls could be hidden in hollow table legs or chairs," Rollie argued.

"There're plenty of things beside tables and chairs," Ann told him. "There're several adorable old clocks—and we haven't even explored the attic. There's no telling what we might find there."

"Are you going to have an auction sale?" asked Floss, speaking for the first time, "or go from door to door?"

"Depend on you for pinning us down with brass tacks!" said Kit, feeling somehow that Floss was trying to prick their bubble of hope.

"Well, you aren't going to sell furniture by floating off on wild, impracticable dreams," Floss stated. "We'll have to make plans."

"I had thought about trying the furniture stores. I noticed an antique shop down on Bay Street," said Ann, thinking out these details almost as she talked.

"An auction sale would be fun," suggested Kit.

"I'm not keen about that," Ann said. "Though I imagine everybody in town would come just to get a look at the house and see what we're doing."

"We don't want a mob nosin' around,"

grunted Rollie. "Somebody might find the pearls and walk off with 'em."

At this everyone laughed. "Now, honey, don't get like Miss Hannah," warned Ann.

Floss had been the most silent of all during the conference, but her thoughtful face indicated that her mind was not idling, and now she leaned toward Ann and said, "Listen, I have an idea."

Everyone turned toward Floss eagerly as she continued, "Ann, you said we had just six weeks to raise the money?"

"Yes. The sale is scheduled for the first Tuesday in August."

"All right, that's six weeks, and there are five of us. If each one raises in some way fifteen dollars a week we will have four hundred and fifty dollars by the first Tuesday in August."

At this evidence of her friend's loyalty Ann suddenly felt a lump in her throat, but she swallowed quickly and exclaimed, "But, Floss, there's no reason why you and Kit should work to pay off my taxes. You came down here to board and enjoy yourselves and not to work out my problems."

"Didn't I tell you once, Miss Ann Elizabeth

Bradley, that we came here to see you through this affair?" put in Kit.

"And as Kit told you before, we aren't going to do it from the grandstand," added Floss. "We're in the game with you to the finish!"

Ann's face flushed and she said, "It may sound foolish and optimistic, after Judge Carter tried to discourage me about finding the pearls, but somehow I feel that maybe I'll be able to pay you back before the summer's over. But right now, I surely need everything everybody can do."

"Well, the rest of you can put over the furniture selling proposition—one or two can do that. As for me, I'm going out and hunt a job," Floss told them.

"Hunt a job!" exclaimed Ann, amazed at this declaration. "Why, your family will be shocked, and you'll be all worn out when school starts again."

"Oh, no I won't. The experience will help me with my work next year. I've only one more year before my business course is finished, and I ought to be able to hold down a stenographer's place this summer. Maybe I can fill in for somebody who's going off on vacation."

Ann knew there was no use arguing, for Floss had a will of her own. As she rose John stood up too.

"And I know how I'm going to make my money," he said. "These creeks are swarming with fish. I'll be a fisherman till my water plants are big enough to sell. I've already been looking around at the swell guys' houses here, and there're lots of fish ponds and fountains in the gardens where I might sell water plants."

"I guess that leaves us three to get rid of the antiques," said Ann.

"Then let's get to work right now. I'm bustin' to pick out the things we're going to sell first," replied Kit, ready for action.

"Nothin' with hollow posts or cushions," Rollie said as he followed the two girls into the house.

CHAPTER VII

KIT AND THE ANTIQUES

Two days had passed since Ann's little household made such noble resolutions to raise the tax money by the first Tuesday in August. The date had been marked with a red circle on the calendar in the kitchen. Beyond that point they had no plans. Everyone agreed that their trouble must be kept from those back home. Letters from Mrs. Reynolds were not very cheery and Ann was determined to add no more burdens to her mother's life. She was certain that her stepfather could do nothing to relieve the present distressing situation. With the aid of her friends and brothers she would fight out her own problem.

On Monday evening Ann and Kit prepared supper early. They were both tired and anxious to be done with this day's duties. Since daylight they had been cleaning house, selecting and polishing furniture in hopes of making their first sales. John finished his paper route early and

during the morning helped Rollie clear weeds and trash from the lawns close to the house.

"I'm thankful we had things as straight as they were when Mrs. Simmons came to call," said Ann, when she and Kit sat down wearily on the porch to wait for the others to come in to supper.

"Don't mention it," Kit said gratefully. "She looks like the kind who would clean out the corners of her stairs with a toothpick. We must make a good impression if we expect to collect seventy-five dollars a week out of this town!"

"That looks like an awful lot," said Ann, on viewing their allotments in a sum. "Wonder if we've bitten off too much? Do you think we'll make it?"

"Of course we will—if we make up our minds to!" stated Kit with perfect confidence. "Why, there're literally thousands of dollars' worth of antiques in this old house. There's nothing to do now but find someone to buy them."

"Yes, that's all," agreed Ann in a flat tone. "Mrs. Simmons wasn't very encouraging about it—said she'd been advertising a gate-legged table for a long time and nobody would have it for love nor money. It seems there was a bank

failure here not long ago, and on top of that potatoes didn't bring what the truck planters usually get, so everybody's strapped. I guess Judge Carter knew what he was talking about when he said real estate was dead here."

"Well, at least you have a bright prospect of getting a job in the choir for several weeks. Lucky you sat near Mrs. Simmons in church yesterday."

The previous morning Ann's entire family had gone to the picturesque old church a few blocks away. Rollie, who so loved everything historical, in his explorations about town, had investigated this little church in its park-like grove of oaks. He learned that it was one of the oldest in the south, the bricks having been brought from England in the seventeenth century. At his suggestion they worshiped there on Sunday morning. And fortunately the vacation-time audience was not large enough to hide the beauty of Ann's contralto voice.

"I was right proud to be next you, Ann," said Kit when they were returning from church. "So many people turned to see where that lovely voice was coming from."

"She would've been singing over radio this week if she hadn't come south," John reminded them.

"Oh, let's forget that," urged Ann, who didn't like to think of what she had given up.

A half dozen friendly, curious members of the church had spoken to them after the service, some inquiring how they liked living at the old Bradley place, others inviting them to come to the young peoples' organizations. Mrs. Simmons, a woman of middle age, followed them to the gate and asked if she could call the following afternoon. Ann at once recalled that a Mrs. Lena Simmons had signed Miss Hannah's will and inquiry revealed this friendly soul to be the same person. Ann was very glad to be forewarned. Otherwise she would have been caught in a dress besmeared with dust and dirt.

Directly after breakfast on Monday Floss announced that she would start hunting a job at once. At noon she came in to lunch, rather hot and tired, but refusing to be discouraged. Though she had not yet called on Judge Carter, she promised Ann to go to him for suggestions on her return to town. John, too, soon vanished

after lunch. Rollie, declaring his yard work had been enough for one hot day, selected a book from the musty-volumned library and made himself comfortable under an oak on the clean-raked lawn.

So Ann and Kit were left the responsibility of receiving Mrs. Simmons. " I'll get the tea and cookies while you answer her questions," said Kit with a knowing wink when they saw Mrs. Simmons coming up the curving drive. As she walked briskly toward the porch she was taking in every detail with curious, eager gaze, and Ann drew in a deep breath, realizing that she had a difficult hour before her. But Mrs. Simmons proved to be more a bureau of information than a question box.

Though she did ask a number of questions during the first of her visit they concerned Ann and her musical education rather than the old Bradley estate. Then to Ann's surprise she stated that she was chairman of the music committee, and wanted Ann to substitute for their contralto, who was leaving on vacation that week.

" Of course I can't make you a direct offer," added Mrs. Simmons quickly. " Your voice will

have to be tried out by the choir director, but I feel sure you'll have no trouble making the grade with the training you've had. We always pay our substitutes five dollars a Sunday."

At these words Kit almost dropped the glass of iced-tea she was handing their guest. Five dollars a Sunday, she thought! Why, that would be a third of Ann's share with practically no trouble.

" Of course it isn't much and we use the choir on Wednesday nights, too, but at least your voice won't get rusty while away from your teachers," quickly exclaimed Mrs. Simmons, mistaking Ann's speechlessness for indifference.

" When—when will they test my voice? " asked Ann, trying vainly not to seem too eager.

" They have choir practice on Tuesday evenings at seven-thirty. If you'll come by my house we'll go over together."

When Mrs. Simmons left Ann and Kit fairly danced a jig on the old worn carpet of the parlor. Suddenly Kit stopped breathlessly and looked seriously at her friend, " And now I've got to make good on the furniture sales. Everybody is getting prospects but me."

In the late afternoon while talking over the affairs of the day Ann and Kit saw Floss turn in through the gate. The very lightness of her step was sufficient advertisement that her efforts had been rewarded.

"Tell us all about it," greeted Kit, going to the steps to meet her. "We can see you had luck."

"Indeed I did! And it's going to be delightful work too," said Floss enthusiastically.

"Here, sit down," said Kit with mock servility, pushing forward the chair from which she had just risen. She handed Floss a fan with a sweeping bow. "After a while everybody will have jobs and I'll be the servant in the house. I may as well get in practice."

"And Judge Carter did help me get it," said Floss, fanning her flushed face and turning eagerly to Ann. "He said the man had only just come in about noon asking if he knew of anyone who could help him."

"How thrilling! Go on," said Kit, sitting down on the steps.

"Well, Judge Carter took me right up to the place. The judge is a dear, isn't he? He

seemed to think I had to have a formal introduction before I could talk to the man about the job. You know I believe he's the same man we met on the edge of town the night we got here. Remember the Englishman who directed us to Bay Street, then looked so queer when we said we were headed for the Bradley place? Well, his name's Stratford, and he has his office in one of those fine colonial houses on the Bay. He's doing the most fascinating work—gathering material to write a book on the old houses of the south."

"And what are you to do?" asked Ann.

"Classify and file the material he gathers, and type the manuscript as he writes it. He was rather vague about how long the work would last, but it will certainly help while it does—and here's the strange coincidence of all. He's going to pay me fifteen dollars a week—and——"

"Why, that's exactly your quota!" exclaimed Kit enviously.

"Yes, that solves my problem," said Floss happily. "And Ann, don't think I'm going to fall down on the job of coaching John in math. I'll still keep that up three evenings a week."

"And I almost landed a job to-day!" put in Ann eagerly. "Honestly, it looks like we are going to make good, doesn't it?"

"Did you? Where? What?" asked Floss.

While Ann told of Mrs. Simmons' visit Kit stared off across the green slope toward the marshes. Rollie still sat under an oak turning pages steadily.

"I must be the worthless one of the bunch," said Kit gloomily, when Ann had finished. "I can't type and I can't sing. I guess I can't do anything but get fatter every day. I've gained two pounds since we came here—and honestly I've never taken life so seriously since I was born!"

"It's the sea air that's doing you good," explained Floss.

"Doing me good!" hooted Kit. "That's just plain mean, Floss, when I'm already all roly-poly. And my nose is simply peppered with freckles."

"Well, Kit darlin', you laugh so much you keep them covered up with sunshine," said Ann affectionately.

At this Kit laughed in spite of herself, then

rose abruptly saying, " Supper's all ready. Come along, let's eat. I'm ravenous! "

" Yet you wonder why you gain," Floss teased, as she followed across the porch.

Ann called Rollie, then said to no one in particular, " I wonder why John doesn't come. He's been away since one o'clock."

But they didn't have to wonder long, for they were scarcely seated at the table when John came sweeping through the hall like an onrushing cyclone.

" Thank heavens we aren't home now! " said Ann fervently. " It seems that John will never learn to walk decently."

" It's those clod-hoppers of his," explained Rollie, glancing up from a book propped against his iced-tea glass.

But Ann had no time to chide John as he rushed into the dining room. " Listen everybody —I got a dandy job! That with the paper route will make eight of my fifteen dollars."

Rollie's book fell to the floor unnoticed. " Where? " he asked.

" Delivery boy down at the paint store—and I don't have to work but an hour in the morning

and another hour in the afternoon. They don't sell so much in a little town like this. That'll leave plenty of time to get my fish pond and water plants started."

"Well, isn't this wonderful!" said Ann happily. "I never dreamed we could do it, but I believe we're really going to put it over."

"Of course we are!" Floss was very confident.

Kit was the only one who made no comment and during the rest of the meal was unusually silent—for Kit. Later she insisted on washing the dishes, though they generally left the supper table until morning. "But I've other things to do in the morning," she said when Ann and Floss objected. "Hard work will help me reduce."

Ann and Floss knew that was not her real motive and insisted on helping with the work. Soon the big kitchen was in order.

Next morning Kit announced her plan of campaign. "There's no use carrying coals to Newcastle, so I'm going to count out all the old families of Oakdale in my antique selling," she explained. "When we were out walking last Sunday I noticed lots of new bungalows on the back streets. There're the people who'll want our stuff."

"But you don't know their names," said Rollie. "Are you going from door to door and say, 'Lady, do you want to buy an old gate-legged table that's been in use since Adam's legs passed through the gates of Eden? Or how about a Chippendale sideboard made from chips-of-Eden's-dale?'"

The girls laughed, but John only grunted, "Smarty! Think you're funny—quoting something you read in a book!"

"Didn't either," retorted Rollie. He gave John a dig with his toe.

Ann saw that warfare was imminent and said emphatically, "Now stop that! We want to hear about Kit's plan."

"I'm going down and look up names and addresses of those people living in the new bungalows and write them about the antiques we have to sell. Guess I'll make out a list and we'll get Floss to type it—if you can find time," added Kit glancing at her friend quickly.

"Sure I will," Floss agreed at once. "I could stay after hours to do it. That seems the most practical idea yet—about the antiques."

"And I'm going to the antique shops and fur-

niture stores and see if they'll buy or sell anything there."

"Where're you going to look up the names of people in the bungalows?" Rollie wanted to know.

"In the town directory—and you're going to help me, sweet boy!"

"Like fun, I am! I've got other plans," grunted Rollie.

"What are they? Just 'splain what they are!" ordered John, waving his big hand toward his brother and almost upsetting the milk pitcher. "Nobody's seen you doing anything yet, but sneaking off reading."

"But I been using my brain—that'll take me farther than all your delivery-boy jobs. I'm going to find those pearls!"

"Tell another one!" laughed John.

"Just stop that arguing," commanded Ann. "Oh, how thankful I am that you're here instead of at home! Now listen to me, Rollie, you're going to help Kit with anything she tells you to do."

"All right—all right!" said Rollie resignedly. He had started another book before breakfast

but now he closed it with a snap and hurled it to a near-by chair.

Kit's enthusiasm was not the least dampened by this domestic explosion. "We'll use the city directory at the telephone office, and you can be writing down the list of names while I visit the furniture stores and antique shops."

"I'd go with you, but I ought to stay home and practice a little this morning," said Ann. "I'll have to get my voice limbered up if I'm going to choir practice to-night."

Two days passed and Kit's circular letters had been in the mails twenty-four hours without any response. They had cleared the library opposite the parlor of all save the articles of furniture which they hoped to sell, but not one prospective buyer appeared at the door.

Nor had the antique dealer been very encouraging. "The local people are no buyers of antiques," he said. "All my business is in winter when tourists are here. In summer I fill in my time patchin' broken furniture, and doin' upholstery."

"But wouldn't you like to come up and look

over our stuff?" insisted Kit. "I know we have worlds of things as fine as any here."

"Maybe next winter, but there's no use soakin' money in more stuff when there's nothing sellin' this time o' year."

Kit turned away disappointed. This was Thursday and she had not one penny toward her fifteen dollars. She had painted one of the smaller tables in red and black in imitation of the popular lacquer work, but she couldn't even sell it at the cheap furniture store, where the windows were filled with massive golden oak furniture.

Rollie was with her when she made her unsuccessful attempt to dispose of the modernized table, and now this caricature of a once-beautiful piece of furniture reposed in disgrace on the back seat of their flivver. Soon there wouldn't be money to buy gas, Kit thought bitterly as she drove aimlessly down Bay Street.

"Look, Kit," said Rollie after a time, rousing her from gloomy thoughts. "There's a big ship way out across the bay—see over by that point of land?"

"Just a steamer coming into dock," said Kit without interest.

"But it's not movin'—and no smoke from the stack. I wonder why it's anchored there?"

They were now passing a small zoo in a park on the bay and Rollie, noticing a negro woman holding the hand of a little girl, said, "Stop a minute, Kit. I want to ask about that ship."

Kit wasn't interested, but obligingly thrust her foot on the screaming brakes.

To the boy's inquiry the nurse replied, "Law, dat's a pleasure palace, son. Ain't you neber see um before? She come here ebery summer."

"I've never been here before," explained Rollie. "But what do you mean by pleasure palace? Is it a traveling show?"

"A trabelin' hotel, full o' rich buckra! In winter dey stays to de hotels, but in summer dey say town too hot, so dat big ship go out norf, an' brings 'em back here. Dey anchors out dere where de coolin' breezes blow."

At these words Rollie turned hilariously to Kit. "Do you hear that!" he cried. "There's our chance, Kit! They're the guys to buy our antiques!"

"What a gorgeous idea!" exclaimed Kit. Then almost in the same moment her expression

changed and she added, "How'll we get there? We haven't any boat—and no money to hire one."

Rollie's brow furrowed but almost instantly brightened as he said, "Jim Dawkins has a boat—you know the funny little man who fixed the roof and took me and John fishin' the other day. He promised John to let him use it to get his water plants. I'll bet we can get Jim's boat, Kit!"

"It's worth trying!" exclaimed Kit, turning back toward home so quickly that she almost upset the car. "We'll go this very afternoon."

CHAPTER VIII

THE TOURIST SHIP

KIT and Rollie found John working on his fish pond. He had finished his duties at the paint store for the day, and now entered heartily into Kit's plan.

"Jim said I could have the boat any time," he said, dropping his spade. "Maybe we can hunt around for a few water plants, too."

"We don't want to be rushed," said Kit dubiously. "We may have to do a lot of talking to get those tourists to buy our antiques."

"But we can't carry the stuff in Jim Dawkins' boat. It's rotten dirty. He goes fishing in it—and I guess never cleans it out."

Kit looked disappointed, then added thoughtfully, "If we covered up a few small things they wouldn't get soiled. And I'll take along something to sit on, too, for I want to dress my best."

"And we'll carry some of those lists of what we have to sell and give them around to the passengers," suggested Rollie.

"A dandy idea!" agreed Kit. "We'll invite them to come to the house and buy when they're in town. We'll take that tiny clock and two or three pieces of Wedgwood as samples. You know if we were near a real city we'd have no trouble at all selling the furniture."

"But we haven't money to ship things to a real antique shop so why think about it?" said John.

"Now you hurry and get the boat while Rollie and I wrap up a few things to take along," said Kit. After she started toward the house, she paused to ask, "Say, John, where's Ann?"

"In town—doing the marketing. She meant to wait till you came back with the flivver, but she wanted to get through early and practice. I guess she's got to work pretty hard to keep that job in the choir now that she's landed it."

A half an hour later John returned through the inlet in Jim's boat. When Kit saw him gliding from a strip of protecting marsh east of the house she ran back to the porch for a box of China and the clock. To her amazement Rollie had removed the face of the little clock and was holding a magnifying glass over the intricate cogs and wheels.

"For heaven's sake, what are you doing, Rollie?" she cried in amazement. "Don't get it out of order! It's marvelous enough that it runs at all!"

"You don't think I'm going to let this be sold with—maybe those pearls hidden inside?"

"If they were hidden in that little clock they'd be too tiny to be worth much," laughed Kit. "Come along," she added, picking up the china. "John's almost at the landing."

Rollie reluctantly returned the face to its place, closed the clock and followed Kit. But John delayed them still longer by going to his excavation for a long pole with a hooked, metal end for cutting water plants, a scoop net and his camera from the house. But at last they were off. The boys rowed through winding inlets east of the town, finally emerging into the broad bay. The sinking sun touched with brilliant colors several small sailboats and launches in which pleasure seekers enjoyed the refreshing breezes. But the steamers and schooners docked along the wharves showed few signs of life.

"This wind and spray'll take every bit of powder off my face before we get there." Kit

anxiously examined her freckled nose in the mirror of her compact.

"You should worry," sneered Rollie. "We want the tourists to look at the antiques—not you."

"But I look like an antique," moaned Kit. "Only look—I've gotten seven new freckles on my nose to-day. That's what comes of spending the morning down on Bay Street."

"Hey—look out for that box! It's about to fall!"

John cried out just in time. Kit snatched the precious Wedgwood as a lifting wave almost sent it to the bottom of the boat. She placed the box in her lap and sat back comfortably, determined to enjoy the boat ride and let troubles slide away. Soon they were under the side of the tourist ship, and at the last moment Kit wondered what she would say to the passengers. Quickly she combed out her wind-rumpled bob, patted more powder on her nose, and smoothed her best dress.

"Oh, you're all right," grunted John, with boyish impatience at her primping. "Here're some good ladder-steps for you to go up."

A launch and a rowboat were tied at the bottom of the ladder, but John crowded between them so Kit could reach the ladder easily. Ann or Floss would have planned their line of approach carefully, but Kit scarcely gave this a thought as she mounted the steps. She always depended on the turn of circumstances to supply her with inspiration. Rollie followed with the clock, but John remained in the boat, quite satisfied to let them handle this part of the business while he examined some greenish shell-like formations on the hull of the ship.

Before reaching the top of the ladder Kit had one brief moment of panic, but quickly dismissed it with a toss of her head. Airily she stepped to the deck, then surprise swept over her. Not a human being was in sight. Almost at once she realized that she had come up on the hot, sunny side of the ship. Voices drifted from cool shadows beyond the cabin. Under a canopy of canvas she spied a woman lolling in a wicker chair, and hurried toward her, Rollie trailing after. The beautifully dressed woman was absorbed in a book. Farther down the shady stretch of deck Kit saw others seated or strolling about. She

was about to take the box of Wedgwood from the hollow of her arm when a steward appeared suddenly at her side.

"Did you wish to see someone, madam?" he wanted to know.

Kit had never been addressed as madam before, and the appellation quite disconcerted her. She found herself saying falteringly, "Why—why no one in particular—or rather anybody who would be interested in buying some lovely ——"

"We don't allow sales people on the ship," stated the uniformed man coldly.

"But we aren't sales people!" cried Kit, unconsciously raising her voice. "We knew the tourists would be interested in our wonderful antiques ——"

"Will you kindly move farther down the deck for your argument?" said the beautifully-dressed, but frowning lady from her wicker chair. "Who can read with so much talking?"

"I'll have to ask you to leave the ship," insisted the steward, moving toward the ladder and forcing the young people to back away from the irritable lady.

"If you'd just let a few people look at my

things I'm sure they'd be tremendously interested," insisted Kit, determined not to be driven away.

"But my dear madam, didn't you see the signs posted all over the ship's hull, 'No traders allowed on board'?"

"We aren't traders!" Rollie spoke up for the first time. "We're only tryin' to sell antiques."

"If we allowed it, people would come here trying to sell everything from fish to finger bowls." The man forced them a few feet closer to the ladder as he talked. "Again I'll have to ask you to leave the ship."

"I think you're simply rude!" snapped Kit, losing her temper. "I thought all southern men were polite."

"I'm not a southerner," said the implacable official, nothing daunted by these words. "My home is in Dakota."

"Well, I think you need a kota-polish!" snapped Rollie impudently, before following Kit down the ladder.

Silently the two descended to the waiting boat. John looked up inquiringly at their hasty return.

"That was about the most embarrassing experience I ever had in my life!" exclaimed Kit, sitting down abruptly on the stern locker.

"Wish I'd rammed him one in the ribs!" growled Rollie, now that the enemy was out of sight.

"So he kicked you all out, eh? I was afraid of that—saw the signs after you went up. Oh well, if we can't sell antiques maybe we can find some water plants or fish to make money on." John paused a moment, looking about, then added, "That looks like a good spot to explore—down there south of the ship."

Kit and Rollie were too bitter to care where John took them. "I guess I'm the good-for-nothing of the whole bunch," moaned Kit. "I haven't made a penny yet."

"Neither have I," admitted Rollie. "But you just wait—I bet I find those pearls yet!"

"Wild dreams," grunted John. "We're only going to pay up those back taxes by hard work—and no other way."

"Well, you needn't row so fast I can't keep up with you," panted Rollie.

They were about fifty yards from the tourist

ship when Kit, hearing a sputtering motor as it warmed into action, glanced across the water and saw a launch coming toward them. There was only one person in the boat—a man, who waved for them to stop.

"Wait a minute!" Kit called eagerly to the boys. "There's a man following us. I think he was on deck when we were there. Maybe he wants to buy something."

Waves of the larger boat rocked their little craft and Kit found herself clinging to the box with one hand and hanging on to the side with the other. The launch motor was stopped as the man came alongside.

"I heard what pawsed on deck," explained the stranger, "but didn't get a chance to speak to you before you were gone. I'm tremendously interested in antiques and am wondering what you have to sell."

As he talked Kit had a feeling that she had seen this man before, but couldn't remember when or where. "We have lots of antiques at home," she said, her face brightening. "We've only a few samples here. But that steward was horrid! I was never treated so rudely in my life!"

"It was quite unpawdonable," said the man in his unusual brogue. "But I suppose they have to have rules to keep their guests from being annoyed."

Kit opened her box of Wedgwood as the stranger talked. "I thought the tourists might be interested in buying some of our things," she explained. "We can't sell them among the people in town. I guess they have nothing but old things anyhow, and we simply have to get together some money."

"Now that's too bad. I'm Henry Stratford, and am tremendously interested in old furniture and old houses."

"Then you must be the man who hired Floss!" exclaimed Kit, her face brightening instantly.

"Hired Floss," repeated Mr. Stratford. "Oh, you mean the young lady who is my stenographer?"

"Yes. We all live together over at the old Bradley place."

"Then you're the young people I saw driving into town several days ago."

"Yes. I'm Kathryn Carson and these boys are John and Roland Reynolds."

"And who is Miss Bradley? I thought the property was left to Miss Ann Bradley?" inquired Mr. Stratford, looking from one to the other curiously.

"She's my half-sister," spoke up Rollie quickly. "You see, we found there was a lot of back taxes due on that old house so we're tryin' to raise the money by sellin' antiques. We'd surely be glad if you'd buy some."

"I am interested in antiques as well as old houses. I should be very glad to come up to the house and see what you have."

"You won't have a bit of trouble finding the place," Kit explained. "Anybody can tell you where the old Bradley house is."

Not until afterwards did Kit lay any stress on the strange expression that had come into the man's eyes. When she looked at him now, he turned nervously away and said, "I'll be right over as soon as possible." He paused a moment as though he had been too hasty and added, "Perhaps I'd better take a look at what you have there."

At this Rollie came nearer with the clock, carefully wrapped in a towel. At sight of the odd

little clock with the hand-painted mountain scene on the glass Mr. Stratford's manner became eager. His hands were almost trembling as he reached for it. Long and carefully he examined the old timepiece. He opened the face and looked at the works. He swung the pendulum and tapped the back.

"The jolting of the boat may have stopped it," said Kit nervously. "But it was ticking away when we left home."

"Oh, that doesn't matter," said Mr. Stratford. "I could have the works put in order. What do you want for it, Miss Carson?"

Kit suddenly began to feel her importance. The steward had called her madam and now this stranger was calling her Miss Carson. She had thought of asking twenty dollars for the battered old clock, but now her price soared daringly to thirty.

Mr. Stratford looked up quickly. "Thirty," he repeated, and his tone was so odd that Kit wished she hadn't been so bold. Now perhaps they would miss a sale, for he put the clock down on the launch seat. But oh joy! He was reaching for his purse! With white, well-manicured

fingers he peeled three ten dollar bills from a thick roll and handed them to the overjoyed girl.

The young people were so surprised at this unexpected turn of events that scarcely a word was spoken till the launch had slipped far behind them.

"Can you believe it?" gasped Kit at last. "That's our week's quota, Rollie, in three crisp green bills."

"'I'll bet you could have got fifty, if you'd asked it," said John. "Then I could've had a share. Why, he just bought it without batting an eye. I don't see what he wanted with the old thing. I'll bet it won't keep decent time."

"Somehow I'm sorry we sold it," said Rollie unexpectedly.

"Why?" cried Kit. "That's why we went to the ship."

"I know. But the minute that man spied that clock he looked like he'd found a long-lost friend. I believe he meant to have it—no matter what you asked."

"I do wish I'd asked more," admitted Kit. "But I can't see why you're sorry we got the thirty for it."

"I've never been keen about selling stuff from the house anyhow. Suppose the Bradley pearls were hidden in the clock," said Rollie.

"But you looked inside," Kit reminded him.

"Yes, but you can't tell where those pearls may be hidden."

"That doesn't bother me as much as what you all told about our family affairs," put in John. "It's nobody's business if we've got to raise money for taxes, and I don't like that man's face anyhow. I wish Floss hadn't gone to work for him."

CHAPTER IX

LOST IN THE MARSH

THE three bills, tucked away in Kit's purse, did not seem such a windfall after Rollie's remark. Perhaps Mr. Stratford had bought the clock too readily. Though Kit was positive the pearls could not be hidden in the old relic she had an uncomfortable feeling that the clock was worth far more than she had asked for it.

Kit's was not a nature, however, to nurse uncomfortable thoughts, and she turned lightly to John saying, "We'll have plenty of time to hunt for some water plants."

"Jim Dawkins told me there were worlds of water hyacinths over this way," said John, "in a sort of lagoon somewhere that's chug-full of all sorts of plants. I hope we can find the place."

The boys rowed in silence for a few minutes then Kit stood up suddenly, making the boat dip water as it rocked. "Look, John, there's the funniest fish ahead! See, turning around like a wheel!"

"Oh, boy, it's a porpoise!" exclaimed John, dragging in his oar as he turned. "I've always wanted to see one."

As they watched, other porpoises appeared with their wheel-like motions some distance ahead of the boat. John was wild with excitement. "Gee, I wish I could see one real close! Kit, you take the oar and row real fast and maybe I can snap a picture of one," said John, rummaging in the stern locker for his camera.

Though Kit and Rollie were both eager to watch the strange antics of these fish they knew that the sight was giving John the thrill of his life. On his knees in the prow he set his camera and waited. "Faster!" he called to the rowers. "They're gaining on us."

Kit and Rollie rowed until their faces were streaming with perspiration and Kit's soft hands sore, but John kept urging them on. No one noticed the marsh islands slipping by as they pulled through the broad, deep channel connecting the harbor with the sea. Finally they were close enough for John to make two snaps and after that Rollie rebelled. He drew in his oar and slumped in the seat.

"I'm about to die, I'm so hot!" he burst forth.

Kit began to fan herself with the top of the box in which the china was packed. John had folded up his camera when his attention was attracted by a long-legged crane moving gracefully through the near-by muck.

"Oh boy, isn't he a beaut! Just let me get him!" he murmured, half to himself.

"And there's a little brown bird floating on some reeds," said Rollie, when his brother had taken a picture of the crane.

"I'll bet it's a marsh hen or something." John picked up an oar and pushed closer to the floating object. "It is!" he added a moment later. "And I believe she's sitting on her nest—just bobbing about on the water."

"Seems to me there's a bigger tide than usual this afternoon," said Kit. "They say it's much higher when the moon's full."

"Aren't marsh hens good to eat?" Rollie wanted to know. "If we could catch this one we wouldn't have to buy meat to-morrow."

"Oh, but we couldn't kill her when she's sitting on her nest!" exclaimed John.

"Oh mercy, don't!" added Kit. "Poor little

marsh bird—she looks frightened to death at sight of us anyhow."

John's gaze had already gone beyond the little mother to some thick, satiny-green leaves floating on the water quite a distance away.

"There're some flowering plants over there!" he said, pushing cautiously through a strip of water in which the tips of submerged marsh grass showed.

"Be careful—we may get stuck," warned Kit.

Though John had never been on the coast before he had an instinct for navigation that carried him safely into the deeper channel beyond the flooded marsh. Eagerly he tugged at the floating water plants till the bottom of the boat was filled.

"It must be water hyacinth," he said. "See the lavender blossoms!"

Numberless fish were startled into activity by this intrusion into their peaceful retreat. Rollie caught three small ones with the scoop, but John insisted that they be returned to the water, as they had no bucket in which to carry them back home alive.

They had been moving deeper and deeper into

the marshes, lured by one interesting fish, bird or plant after another. Presently the sun dipped out of sight and for a moment the marshes became vivid emerald and winding waterways reflected the rose of the sky. Now from those level green stretches rose a chorus of voices, crying, "Chee! Chee! Chee!" to departing day.

"It's the marsh hens!" murmured John, something of awe in his tone.

"And that means night's coming," stated Kit. "We've got to beat it for home!"

She sat down and picked up an oar. John was busy arranging the plants so they wouldn't get crushed. The bit of marsh they had crossed some time before had entirely disappeared under rising tide, but Kit and Rollie felt certain they were rowing in the direction from which they had come. The rosy glow went out of the banked western clouds like a light being extinguished. They were now entirely surrounded by marsh. The horizon was broken only here and there by clumps of ragged palms on distant islands.

Suddenly Kit stopped short and exclaimed, "Which way is town? I'm sure I don't know."

John, who had been paying no heed to any-

thing but the water plants, glanced around. "Gee, I didn't realize we'd come so far." He stood up, looking in every direction. "I don't see a sign of the harbor and any ship masts," he added with growing uneasiness.

"I know we've been rowing in the right direction," stated Rollie. "Town's that way—it ought to be north, if the sun set over there."

The others felt uncertain, but Rollie's idea seemed the only thing definite to guide them. John took Kit's oar, and the boys made the boat skim the water rapidly into the north. Fifteen minutes passed and still they seemed no nearer the harbor.

"Ann will be on her head about us," murmured Kit.

"Well, we can't help it," panted John.

It was twilight now. Sand bars and marshy strips merged confusingly with the water. Then they saw just ahead, a thickly wooded island.

"Look!" cried Kit in relief. "There's a fire on that island. Maybe somebody there can tell us how to get to town."

"I hope so," murmured Rollie. "I'm about to starve!"

The boys turned to locate the camp fire and the next moment John burst into hilarious laughter. "You gump!" he cried. "That's no fire—it's the full moon coming up through the trees."

Kit was not in the least disconcerted by her mistake, and said at once, "Anyhow I'm as glad to see the full moon as a camp fire. That will help us find the way home."

"But there is firelight way over to the right," stated Rollie. "Somebody just opened a door and I can see a fire flickerin' inside."

"It is!" cried Kit delighted. "Hurry, surely they can tell us how to get home."

The boys needed no urging and presently their boat was nosing into the shadowy shore. John couldn't find anything to tie to, so threw a heavy anchor on the muddy bank and led the way up the slope. They had only gone a few steps when the moon slipped above a clump of bushes and flooded the clearing with light. Then they heard a thin, childish voice calling, "Hoo, pig! Hoo, pig!" and a moment later spied a little negro girl mounted on a cross-rail fence throwing a bucket of food to some pigs.

"Say, little girl, can you tell us how to get to town?" called John.

There was no reply, save the clatter of a falling bucket. Then a fleeing form dashed across the clearing and disappeared through the open door of the cabin.

"Guess she's not used to callers," giggled Kit nervously. "Come on—let's go to the house. Her parents ought to help us out."

No one felt particularly comfortable hurrying up the slope. From some trees near the lot came the peculiar, restless sound of turkeys finding roosting places for the night. Beyond the rail fence two oxen were munching hay. Now the acrid scent of wood smoke from the open fire replaced the more unpleasant odors of the damp barnyard.

When quite close to the house Rollie murmured, "Oh, boy, they're cooking supper!"

"Gee, I'd give a dollar for something to eat," moaned John, rubbing his stomach.

"Maybe they'll sell us something," suggested Kit, realizing on smelling the food that she, too, was ravenous.

"We've got that thirty dollars," Rollie reminded her happily.

"I'd be afraid to show such big bills—here alone," Kit said cautiously.

"I've got some small change," John was forced to admit. "But you all will have to pay me back. I was saving it to buy some things for my fish pond."

By the time the young people reached the rectangle of light from the open door a man appeared in the doorway, a small, erect, gray-haired old negro man. On seeing the strangers he said, "Good ebenin'."

"Good evening!" repeated Kit, moving forward as spokesman. "We've lost our way. Is it very far to Oakdale?"

"Young folks out fishin' eh, an' los' yer way. It's been many a year since Ah been to Oakdale. But Ah reckon 'tain't fur."

Kit thought of the little negro who had directed them on that first night in Oakdale with this same answer, "'tain't fur."

"But how far?" asked John, stepping up beside Kit. "We've got to get home—my sister will be worried gray-headed about us!"

They could now see the interior of the cabin and a young woman busy among the pots and pans on the hearth. A kettle bubbled on a crane above the crackling logs. The fitful light gave the room a cozy appearance.

At John's words the woman came toward them saying, "It's furder dan Grampah t'ink. He ain't been dere since Ah remember. You go crost Pirate Creek, round Goose-neck Curve—den straight west a piece an' pretty soon you'll begin to see lights o' de town."

"How long will it take?" asked Kit, not at all sure she could follow those directions.

"You oughter make it in two hours wid dem boys to row."

"Two hours!" exploded Rollie. "I'll starve before then."

"Lawsy, what's Ah been t'inkin' 'bout!" exclaimed the negro woman in a jovial tone. "Ah might o' knowed you young ones ain't had no supper. Come right on in, if you don't mind eatin' in a poor nigger's house, an' Ah'll set out some supper fer you."

"Oh, would you?" cried Kit eagerly, for she

had smelled fish frying. "We'd be glad to pay you for a meal."

"Lawdy child, Ah ain't dat low down! Who wouldn't share grub wid three people los' off fum home? Jes' come right in an' set down while Ah dish it up."

The old man hastened to place three hand-made, hide-bottomed chairs close to the spotless, pine-board table.

"Here, you Angeline!" exclaimed the woman lifting her head and calling toward the rear door. Kit had spied the whites of a pair of big, round eyes in the darkness there. "Fetch dat lamp off de top cubboard shelf!"

At the name given the timid little girl the boys kept their faces straight with difficulty, for Kit shot them warning glances. Presently the child appeared proudly carrying the lamp which was evidently only used on special occasions. Angeline was a thin, scrawny little girl, with round black eyes, and an ebony face indicating that she was a pure-blood Gullah like her great-grandfather. Her scant dress caught her well above the knees. Her woolly head was tightly wrapped with grayish thread, and little

pigtails were bound down in criss-cross fashion over her head.

Kit was fascinated by this child, who seemed to fear that they might murder her if she got too close. But John's attention was held by the erect old negro man, who was now placing dishes on the table as his granddaughter took up the supper from the hearth.

"Many's de time Ah served mah white folks, but neber on no pine boards like dis," said the old negro sadly shaking his head.

"But it's clean as a table kin be," his granddaughter replied in an injured tone. "It ain't been a hour since Ah scrub 'em!"

"Ah know, but in de ole days we hab fine linen an' silver."

"Grampah always talkin' 'bout days befoh de wah," laughed the woman. "Ah reckon he white folks wus de bes' in de lan'."

"So you were a slave!" exclaimed Kit with keen interest.

"An' Ah love mah marster better'n maself!" said the old negro, tears coming easily to his dim eyes. "But he got kilt in de war an' Ah ain't neber sot mah eyes on us house since."

"Now, Grampah, don't you git start talkin' 'bout de war. Dese chillun hongry," admonished the woman. "Now y'all jes' he'p yourselves. Dey's fish an' rice an' greens an' corn pone enough fer y'all an' us, too."

Never had such plain food tasted so good! Though large inroads were made on the dishes the woman scorned their offers to pay when they started off. The old negro man volunteered to go ahead of them in his boat till they were beyond Goose-neck Curve where they could see the glow of town lights. They thanked him profusely when they left and he invited them to come again to see "us-all."

An hour and a half later they reached home and found two miserable girls about ready to report the disappearance of the other three members of their household to the town police.

Detailed explanations and three crisp ten dollar bills did much toward pacifying Ann, who had burst into tears at sight of them. Kit told of the funny little negro girl and their feast at the island cabin, making Ann and Floss laugh in spite of their recent misery. But when John repeated the old negro man's story of not having

been to Oakdale since the war Ann's eyes opened with real interest.

"What were the names of the people who owned him?" she asked.

"We didn't ask," said Kit regretfully. "About that time the woman had supper ready and we were too hungry to think of anything else."

"Why?" asked John, half-sensing the reason for his sister's question.

"Because I have a hunch he once belonged to my great-grandfather," Ann replied slowly. "He said his master was killed in the war—and Captain Bradley was—remember?"

"Gee, I wish we'd had sense enough to ask," said Rollie. "Maybe he could tell us something about the Bradley pearls."

CHAPTER X

A MYSTERIOUS VISITOR

ANN was eager to return to the island to learn what she could from the old ex-slave, but Jim Dawkins was using his boat for a week-end fishing trip into the marshes. It was against Jim's nature to begin a job on Friday that could not be finished during the day. As Saturday was a half-holiday he generally did little work between Thursday and Monday morning. Ann thought of hiring a boat, but that seemed an unnecessary expense when by waiting they could use Jim's for nothing.

Ann's first Sunday in the choir proved to be a real triumph. At the evening service she had a small solo part. As the full, mellow tones of her voice filled the small auditorium at least four hearts swelled with pride and joy. Though Ann was not what would be called a pretty girl, there were strength and sweetness in her face, which gave an illusion of beauty when she put her whole soul into her singing.

Mrs. Simmons could scarcely wait till the benediction was pronounced to rush up to Kit and Floss and tell them how beautiful Ann's voice was, and of her delight at having so gifted a person in the choir. In the midst of this effusive speech Mrs. Simmons glanced toward the door from which members of the choir were emerging, and exclaimed, "Oh look, there's Mr. Hilton speaking to Ann. Oh, I hope he wants her to sing over radio!"

"Over radio?" said John eagerly. "I didn't know they broadcasted from this little town."

"It's a special program we're giving to advertise Oakdale. You know our winter population is largely tourist, and every summer a good bit of money is spent in advertising. A chorus of negroes will sing spirituals, and Mr. Hilton is anxious to have this church choir represented because ours is the oldest church in this part of the country."

"Well, Ann can sure do it," boasted Rollie. "She was going to sing over radio at home last week if we hadn't come down here."

To the delight of everyone Ann told them as they were going home that she had not only been

asked to broadcast with the church choir, but also to sing a solo. "Mr. Hilton says a contralto voice carries much better than any other over radio, and when I told him I'd already worked up a song for a program at home he was quite impressed."

"When's the program to be put on?" asked Floss.

"Tuesday night."

"But why the short notice?" asked Kit.

"It's not short notice for the others," answered Ann. "I suppose they didn't mention it to me until they heard my voice. Thank goodness, I've kept up my practicing! I believe I can be ready by Tuesday night."

"That's simply scrumptious!" bubbled Kit, fairly glowing. "What'll you wear, darlin'?"

At this everyone but Kit laughed, then John exclaimed, "What difference do clothes make? They aren't going to have television, too!"

"Clothes make all the difference in the world," Kit defended herself. "I know now I was able to stand my ground on that tourist ship because I was well dressed—being well dressed gives you confidence in yourself."

"They ran you off, just the same," teased John.

"They didn't either," retorted Kit flushing. "I left more slowly than I went, and I'm sure Mr. Stratford wouldn't have followed us to buy that clock if I'd been a bedraggled, untidy looking person."

"It still seems a strange coincidence to me that he's the one who bought it," mused Floss, a rather anxious expression on her face, "I can't imagine what he's done with it. There was no sign of it anywhere when I went to work yesterday."

"I don't care what he did with it," Kit said gayly. "Just so we got our thirty dollars."

"I'd rather have the clock," stated Rollie doggedly.

"You've said that fifty times," grunted John in disgust. "Now I want to hear about Ann's broadcasting. Where's the station?"

"At the tourist hotel there at the end of Bay Street. They're to open part of it for this program. In winter the hotel orchestra broadcasts and they have everything all fixed up for it."

"I saw something in the paper about that

hotel," said Rollie. "It's been broken into several times this summer. They think it's boys—only small things have been stolen. Believe me, a tough bunch generally hangs around the docks down on the Bay."

"I've always wanted to see inside the hotel," said John. "They have a big flower garden behind that high fence with lots of pools and statues and sundials. I'm going to try and sell the gardener some water plants if I can get inside."

"But Ann's broadcastin' at the hotel—not you," Rollie grunted. "Who said you were goin'?"

"She can't go up there by herself," John came back craftily. "I've taken her to choir practice and I guess I can take her to broadcast."

"Of course you can," Ann said at once. "I want all of you to go. It will be wonderful to hear those spirituals the negroes are going to sing. There's to be a rehearsal to-morrow night. Surely they won't mind visitors then."

During the next two days money-making plans slipped into the background, and all thoughts

turned to Ann's opportunity. John, however, used every spare moment to work on his tide-water fish pond in the marshy hollow below the bluff. When he could coax Rollie away from books he gave him the task of rebuilding the winding walk which led from the upper lawn to the lush green marsh near the pond. There must have been stepping stones on the slope in the old days. When weeds were pulled up and trash cleared away they found some small slabs half buried in earth. Other bits of stone were found far out in the marsh where he was digging his canal to flood his pond with tide water twice daily.

Rollie preferred trimming the lawn and rebuilding the winding path. He disliked bogging in the black, mucky earth of the pond itself. In his digging John found so many bits of rough, rocky substance and stone that he wondered if the spot had once been a graveyard. He mentioned these misgivings to no one at home, but confided in Judge Carter.

The judge laughed and said, " Oh now, don't let that worry you, my boy. Everybody who dies about here is buried in some churchyard. I reckon you've stumbled on bits of an old

coquina rock boathouse that used to be on the Bradley place."

At these words John's hopes mounted. Perhaps in that boathouse the pearls were hidden, and Miss Hannah hadn't found them because the building was destroyed. His heart was beating fast, his voice tense as he asked, "What—what happened to the boathouse? When was it torn down?"

"It was blown down in a storm when I was a mere baby, but I've heard my father speak of that storm many times. It caused much destruction and played many queer tricks."

"And blew the boathouse into the marsh?" inquired the boy.

"Strange, but it did. And there sat the captain's frame house high on that bluff above the marsh, and the storm didn't so much as twist a column of the porch, or tear off a blind. But the little old boathouse down on the marsh, built of coquina rock, was completely demolished. What wasn't entirely washed away was beaten to bits and sunk in the marsh."

"But that was long before the war, wasn't it?" asked John.

"At least five years before."

"Then the Bradley pearls couldn't have been hidden there," stated John.

"Tut—tut! Oh—no! You youngsters would better get the notion of those pearls out of your heads. You don't want to fall into poor Miss Hannah's state of mind. I'm convinced the captain got hold of that string of pearls after his wife left for the plantation and put them somewhere. Probably nobody will ever know now. They may have been found by soldiers occupying the house during the war days. If that's so, we'll never know it and there's no use wasting valuable time in vain hopes."

Pushing his swivel chair back the judge filled and lighted his pipe while the boy sat dreaming, his eyes on far distant stretches beyond the bay, that could be seen through the rear office window.

"How're your financial plans progressing?" asked the judge at last. "Miss Ann told me about your budget system."

"I don't know if we'll make it or not," replied John gloomily. After the hopes he had just entertained this slow method of making money seemed a snail's pace. "We've only sold one of

the antiques. Nobody will come to the house to look at the things."

Judge Carter puffed thoughtfully a moment before replying, "I don't want to discourage you, son, but I'm afraid the local people won't go to your house. I reckon the few who have money to spend are afraid Miss Hannah's furniture will bring them bad luck. I believe Miss Kit struck on the right idea when she tried to make some sales at the tourist ship."

"But they won't let us go aboard," John told him.

"I know, but you might try waiting with some small things at the various landings where the tourists come ashore."

"That's a dandy idea!" exclaimed John with renewed interest. "I'll talk it over with Kit right away."

But John's suggestion proved inopportune. Kit was busy remodeling one of her prettiest dresses to fit Ann's slender figure. She told John she couldn't think of antiques and modern fashions at the same time.

"Ann must look so wonderful to-night that she'll have perfect confidence in herself," she

added, gazing enraptured at the flimsy bit of blue she held in her hand.

In disgust John went back to his fish pond, thinking that girls were queer creatures.

That evening at seven-thirty Ann was a picture of dainty loveliness in the blue dress Kit had fashioned. Kit always insisted afterwards that it was Ann's stunning appearance that made her sing so well, but Ann knew she surpassed all her previous singing because of strange, stirring emotions roused by the negro spirituals. The primitive, moving harmony of those perfectly blended voices touched a responsive chord in the girl's nature. The mood was still with her when she rose to sing, so that she forgot herself and put her whole soul into her song.

However, it was not the congratulations of the appreciative town people, nor the realization that she had done her best which made that broadcasting program an event never to be forgotten. A result of that evening became evident two days later and changed the whole trend of Ann's life.

In the middle of Thursday morning Floss was at work. John and Rollie were placing some

rocky bulwarks around their fish pond, while Kit and Ann were polishing small pieces of furniture, preparatory to carrying out Judge Carter's suggestion. Suddenly Kit noticed a man coming up the walk.

"Oh Jimminy!" she exclaimed. "Maybe somebody wants to look at the furniture."

Ann glanced through the window nervously. "Is it Mr. Stratford? Didn't he say he was coming?"

"Yes. But he's lots taller than this man. Gee, he's handsome! Let's fly and fix up."

"He's almost here. There isn't time." Ann was overcome with momentary panic. "Say, Kit, you look all right. You answer the door. My dress is potty! That's what comes of helping John and Rollie place those heavy stones around the pond."

"Do I really look all right?" said Kit anxiously, rushing to an oval, walnut-framed mirror, marked fifteen dollars. She gave her hair a hurried pat.

"There's the knocker," said Ann breathlessly. "Do go! I'll fly up the back steps and change my dress."

Ann ran toward the stairs. With utmost speed she changed to another dress. She caught some stray locks closer at the back of her neck as she hurried down the front stairs. Before reaching the bottom step she saw Kit emerge from the library and close the door behind her.

"He wants to see you, Ann—'specially."

"Why me?" asked Ann. "You were the one who sent out the furniture ads."

"I don't believe he even came to see the antiques. He didn't once glance at the things when I took him in. He's a queer looking person, Ann—handsome, but so foreign looking."

As Ann entered the room she saw that Kit had not exaggerated. A young man, rather small but with a perfect physique, rose as she opened the door, and advanced a few steps toward her. But for his neatly fitting American clothes she would have pronounced him at once a native of India. His crisp, jet-black hair was brushed straight back from a finely chiseled face. His rather full lips had an upward curve at the corners that was redeeming. His face glowed into a smile as he stepped toward Ann with outstretched hand.

"You will probably be surprised at a total stranger coming this way, unannounced. But I believe you will pardon when you understand. My name is Rajagopal."

As Ann touched his outstretched hand she replied, "I'm pleased to know you. I'm Ann Elizabeth Bradley."

"Yes. I knew you were a Bradley—that is why I came."

Ann's gaze lifted to his eyes again at these words. A sudden feeling swept over her that this was a momentous meeting and before her no ordinary man. But people seldom express their innermost thoughts and she replied with a commonplace remark, and a slightly embarrassed laugh, "We thought perhaps you were coming to look at the antiques."

She chose a chair near the window and he resumed his seat. At these words he glanced about the room, noting the price-marked tables, mirrors, chairs, china and pewter, which the girls had prepared for sale.

"It is too bad that you must sell these rare things from this beautiful old house," he commented. The expression of his face was un-

usually calm and peaceful. "Perhaps you will not think it wise to do so when you have heard what I shall say."

Ann was now fully convinced that he was a Hindu. All he lacked was a turban, a white robe and an oriental setting to complete the picture. That oval, olive face and those large, dark eyes could belong to no other race. Even his remark that his coming might entirely change her plans roused no resentment in the girl, because of the kindliness in his tone.

"Why do you say that? And—and why have you come then?" Ann finally asked.

"I will explain," he said. "My home is in New Jersey. On Tuesday night we tuned our radio for the Oakdale program. We always listen in when Oakdale broadcasts—for one reason—because we love the negro spirituals. Then the announcer said that Miss Ann Elizabeth Bradley would sing, and my heart lifted for joy, and also my old father's. We knew that the kindly fates were at last turning a smiling face upon our family."

At these words Ann's face flushed, her eyes grew wide. The thought of Kit being within

calling distance was a comfort. Surely this handsome, well-poised man was not right mentally. What effect could her singing have upon the welfare of his family?

"I see I bewilder you," he hastened to add, evidently sensing at once how she felt. "I shall explain. My father and I have long tried to find some descendants of that kindly man, Captain William Bradley, who owned this house. Until this morning when I was assured you were his great-granddaughter, we have failed."

Ann moved forward to the edge of the chair at these words. Instantly thoughts of the Bradley pearls darted through her mind. Perhaps this stranger's coming was of vital importance.

But Rajagopal was continuing. "We have searched the directories of many southern cities and all in Mississippi where your family went after the war without finding any lawful descendants of this illustrious name."

"But I've been living right there in Anston all my life!" said Ann.

"Ten years ago my father went to that city twice hunting the name," said the Indian.

"Oh, I know why you couldn't find me!" ex-

claimed Ann, her face suddenly brightening. "Our family would be listed in the directory in my stepfather's name. You see my own father died and my mother married again when I was only a year and a half old, and lots of people call me Reynolds about half the time."

"I see. I understand."

"But I don't understand," said Ann, still mystified. "Why should my singing over radio have anything to do with the welfare of your family?"

"Much—oh, much! Not your singing especially, though that was very beautiful, but your being here in this town—a Bradley in Oakdale."

"Yes?" Ann was breathlessly eager.

"I caught the midnight train, and reached here during last night, so that no moment should be wasted. I came to ask you—I came to ask you," and now the hands that had been lying relaxed on his knees suddenly grew tense as Rajagopal leaned slightly toward the girl and lowered his voice, "if your family still owns the string of pearls that once belonged to Captain Bradley?"

Ann made no reply for a tense moment.

What did this foreigner know of the Bradley pearls? Why had he come to ask about them? She longed to fly to Judge Carter for advice, but she, alone, could find no evasive answer with his steady, dark eyes looking into hers.

"I never heard of the Bradley pearls till Miss Hannah Whitmore left me this place," she answered honestly.

"Then your family never had them?"

"No—I feel quite certain of that, for Mother would have known something about them. It was only after I came here that I heard of the message Captain Bradley sent back when he was dying."

"Could you tell me about that?" asked the young man, gently, but urgently.

There was no reason why he shouldn't know, thought Ann, since the whole town was familiar with those traditions, so she quietly repeated the story.

When she had finished Rajagopal looked around the large room, at the old furniture. "Then there is a possibility that the pearls may still be hidden in this house," he said hopefully.

"A very faint one it seems to me, since Miss

Hannah had everything almost torn apart in her search."

"It would have been strange indeed had she found them," mused Rajagopal. "They belong to you, and if they are ever found, Miss Bradley, my father and I will buy them from you at whatever value is placed upon them by the finest jeweler in this country."

"Oh—er," Ann found herself gasping inarticulately at the possibilities which these words held, "but—but why should you so especially want those particular pearls?"

"No others could serve our purpose," he answered enigmatically.

Ann's head was whirling giddily. At last she stood up suddenly, saying, "Then I'll begin and search every square inch of the house and grounds—if—if the pearls are so valuable and important as that."

Rajagopal rose too, and moving a step closer to Ann said, "I only ask that you tell no one of the offer I have made. It is of the utmost importance to keep secret my interest in the pearls."

CHAPTER XI

JUDGE CARTER RECALLS THE PAST

In a daze Ann followed the strange visitor to the door. Then just as he was bidding her good morning she suddenly woke up. He had asked her to tell no one of his interest in the pearls. But could she keep that secret from her family? Kit would want to know why he had called. Then, too, she must make some explanation to them for searching for the pearls when she had declared such an undertaking sheer folly.

"Mr.—er—Rajagopal!" she called when the Indian had reached the top step. "Wait just a minute, please."

The young man turned back, his head uplifted slightly as he said questioningly, "Yes?" His every movement was graceful, his manner always calm and self-possessed.

"You asked me to tell nobody about your interest in the pearls. They will want an explanation here if I begin searching—and Kit—er—my friend will want to know why you called."

"One doesn't have to explain all actions to one's household," stated the Hindu.

"But my household is different," explained Ann at once. "You see they all came with me to help me. They're as interested in everything as I am."

"Your household?" asked Rajagopal. "Who are they? I thought you were the only Bradley living."

"My half-brothers, John and Roland, and my two friends, Kathryn and Florence, but they really seem like sisters. They couldn't be dearer to me if they were! Why, they're working just as hard as the boys and I to keep this place."

A gentle smile illuminated the young man's face as he said, "I see that you are of that great brotherhood of humanity to whom kinship of spirit means as much as kinship of blood."

"I had never thought of it in such beautiful words before," murmured Ann, wondering at this strange personality that had crossed her path, "but it is quite true."

"Yes, I think those four of your household must be trusted with my secret. Only it is of the utmost importance that no one in town shall know

why I am here. It is important to you, too, Miss Bradley, for I would not endanger your welfare."

Ann stood thoughtful, wondering, while Rajagopal with slow and dignified steps passed out of sight behind the shrubbery bordering the drive. Scarcely had he reached the gate when Ann caught sounds of shuffling feet, vainly trying to be noiseless in the hall. Then John's voice in a stage whisper called, "Come on in, Ann, and tell us all about it."

So Kit had gone out and told the boys of their strange caller. As Ann passed through the door, Kit, sitting on the newel post, burst forth, "For goodness sakes, honey, you look like you'd seen a ghost. What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," replied Ann. "Only what's happened is so strange—and—and already I wish I'd asked a dozen questions I didn't think of while he was here. And I don't even know where he's staying."

"We don't know what you're talking about," grunted John. "Say, I didn't mean to listen but I heard that man say you could trust us with the secret, so let her out!"

Ann began at the beginning and repeated her conversation with the young man as nearly as she could, amid so many interruptions from her three listeners.

"Wonder how he heard about the pearls?" asked John.

"He could have heard through the will being published in the paper," Kit speculated.

"But I believe he's known about them longer than that," said Ann. "His father went west hunting for descendants of Captain Bradley—ten years ago."

"And that was just when Judge Carter said an ad. appeared in the paper inquiring about the Bradley pearls," put in Rollie.

"No! Jim Dawkins told me that first," said Ann.

"Anyhow it was about the same time." Rollie's eyes were sparkling. "Oh, gee! I never thought we'd be all mixed up in a regular mystery like this!"

"Am I glad I came?" questioned Kit of no one in particular. "Oh, boy! Where do we start the search, Ann?"

"I don't see how you get such a kick out of

it," grunted John. "There's not the faintest chance we'll ever find the pearls." His mud-stained clothes and grimy face and hands presented quite a contrast to the high-backed antique in which he slumped.

"I don't know where to start hunting," said Ann in reply to Kit's question. "There's so much to think about. Why do you suppose he wants those particular pearls?"

"Maybe they originally came from India where he lives," Kit made a wild guess.

"But he's surely lived in America a long time. His clothes were like ours, and he spoke perfect English—even if he did pronounce 'Miss, Mees,' and use a terribly broad *a*."

"If we could only find out where Captain Bradley bought the pearls," said Rollie, "that would help."

Ann's face brightened. "I'm going down and talk to Judge Carter again," she stated. "Every time I've been there I've been so worried over this old tax money I've scarcely thought of the pearls. I'm going to get him to tell me everything he can think of about those old days before my great-grandfather went away."

"I'll have lunch ready by the time you get back," Kit volunteered. "And for goodness sakes hurry—we'll be fairly bustin' to hear everything."

"Don't forget you promised that Hindu to keep mum," John warned her when she started out.

"I won't forget, but I wish I could tell Judge Carter," said Ann regretfully.

She found the judge writing letters, but he pushed the work aside and rose as his young friend entered. Ann came at once to the point. Did the judge have time to tell her all he knew of her great-grandfather's life in Oakdale?

"You've asked for a long story, Miss Ann," said the old man. But she saw a twinkle in his small, dim eyes and knew this task of reminiscence was not distasteful to one of his temperament and age.

"You see I was about ten years old when the northern forces took over this town, and I reckon some of my recollections are all mixed up with stories older people have told over and over. From the time I can remember Captain Bradley was my hero." He filled his pipe as he began,

and now pushed back his swivel chair and struck a match under the seat. When the tobacco was glowing he continued slowly, gazing through the rear window where the spars of a four-mast schooner were yellow-tipped in morning sunlight. "To any boy of ten the owner of a foreign-trading schooner is a sort of god. The captain used to bring me lots of queer jig-a-does from many corners of the earth. His schooner went often to India, China and Japan for tea and spices and fine silks."

At the word "India" Ann sat forward expectantly.

"But more wonderful than the trinkets were his yarns of wild adventure. Then I'll never forget the day he came home bringing a young Hindu and his wife."

"Oh!" cried Ann. "Go on!"

"Yes, ma'am, regular heathens as the town people called 'em—only they weren't heathen at all, for they had accepted Christianity, and that's why they were exiled."

"Oh, then they were exiled," said Ann disappointed. "I—I thought maybe they might have been wealthy visitors."

"They had absolutely not a penny," stated the judge emphatically. And at these words Ann's hopes vanished. After all it seemed that these visitors had nothing to do with the pearls.

"The captain kept them six months. Mrs. Bradley taught them both to speak English. They would have been helpless as two babes turned loose in this big country with no knowledge of our language. Then the war came. When the northern fleet approached, the captain sent his family up to their plantation. The Hindu and his wife stayed there at the house on the marsh a while. I'll never forget the day they left—and that was the last time I ever saw the old captain, too."

The judge paused a moment as though trying to clear up those long-ago events. Presently he continued, "I don't just recollect why or how it was, but anyhow my father sent me up to Captain Bradley's house with a note—evidently a summons to a conference concerning the approach of the northern fleet. I found the captain sitting with his Indian guests on the lawn. The grounds were beautiful in those days—all flower beds and shady trees, with winding paths and

pretty urns and things about. And how Captain Bradley loved to entertain! The most cultured people in town had learned to like the strange couple he had taken in. Even if they did come from far-off India they had the best education their country offered, and could talk of many interesting things."

Ann thought of Rajagopal and wished again she could confide in Judge Carter. Never before had the people of India seemed so interesting. But her old friend was continuing.

"Anyhow, on that memorable day when I went up there, Josiah was serving them tea on the lawn."

"Who was Josiah?" asked Ann.

"A black boy about twenty years old that the judge owned. A bright chap he was too, and could serve guests in fine style. He fairly worshiped his master and used to haunt the docks watching for the captain's ship when it was expected. Well, as I said Josiah was serving tea on the lawn when I went up with the message from my father. After reading the note I can remember as plain as if it was yesterday how the

captain stood up so suddenly his chair went over backwards.

"'My dear friends,' he said to the Hindu couple, 'the time has come when I must leave to help my southland. I'll give you horses and what money I have and you must travel westward as fast as possible. It seems inevitable that the northern fleet will take over this harbor!'" The judge paused to knock gray ashes from his pipe. "As well as I remember those were his exact words," he continued after a moment. "There was more talk and everybody was in a hurry, and poor Josiah was so scared you could scarcely see anything but the whites of his eyes. The other slaves had already gone up to the plantation with Mrs. Bradley and her son, but that faithful black boy had begged to stay by his master to the last."

"And did he go to war with my great-grandfather—or what happened to him?" asked Ann.

"No. But I do recollect he was the last one left on the place before it was taken over by the northern forces. Some say that faithful nigger stuck by the house till the northern commander

was coming through the gate, then he escaped in a boat he had anchored on the inlet."

"And the Hindu couple had already escaped?" asked Ann.

"Yes. They left at once and as far as I know nobody in this town has ever heard of them or seen them since. Whether they were killed in some of the raids being made on homes and Inns at that time—or what happened to them I'm sure I don't know. Many people here have insisted that the captain harboring heathens brought bad luck not only to his home, but to the whole town. But no intelligent people lay any stress on such talk as that."

"Of course we don't believe such superstitions," said Ann with an odd little smile. "But those traditions have certainly affected us. We can't get rid of any of my great-grandfather's furniture—or even the house because of it."

"I'll have to admit that's true, my child."

"What happened to Josiah? Did he come back after the northern forces left?"

"Once—just once! It seems he hid in the marsh islands all during the last part of the war. On the very day he came to town the Bradley

house was auctioned off by the government. The captain had died—his family were gone, nobody knew where—and none of his old friends had money left to redeem their own property much less to save the captain's, so the fine old house was knocked down for a mere song to this Harvey Whitmore, Miss Hannah's father."

"So that's how they got it!" exclaimed Ann.

"Poor Josiah was at the sale—and you never saw a nigger so mad and so miserable. He vowed he'd never come back to this town until the Bradleys had returned to the old house, and as far as I know he's kept his word."

At this description Ann thought of the old negro in the marshes. He had plainly stated to Kit and the boys that he had been to Oakdale but once since the war—and had talked lovingly about serving his white folks. Could this old man be the loyal Josiah?

Quickly she told Judge Carter the facts and at once her friend replied, "Why, Miss Ann, it seems quite likely this must be the same nigger. They say he married and settled over there somewhere."

"Do you suppose—do you suppose," Ann

began breathlessly, " that he would know anything about the Bradley pearls? "

" Now, Miss Ann, don't get all excited again about those mythical pearls. Anyhow the captain wasn't the kind of man to confide in a black boy about such a treasure."

" But this boy was different—so faithful—staying at the house till the last." Ann would not give up hope.

" You might go into the marshes and talk to him," suggested the judge. " He'd be likely to remember that last day with the captain even if old age has dimmed other recollections."

" That's exactly what I'm going to do," stated Ann rising.

CHAPTER XII

OLD JOSIAH

JUDGE CARTER'S story created much excitement when Ann returned home and told the others. The boys wanted to start for the marsh island without taking time to finish lunch.

"He must be the same man!" exclaimed John.

"And I'll bet he knows about the pearls if anyone does," Rollie added.

"Let's go this afternoon if John can get the boat," Kit suggested.

"I'm 'most sure I can get it," said John. "I helped Jim haul some shingles this morning. He's doing a big job and said he wouldn't be using the boat for several days."

"I wish you could go too, Floss," said Ann, glancing across the table at her friend. "Even if we don't learn anything from the old man, the trip will be fun."

"Maybe I can," said Floss hopefully. "I had almost nothing to do yesterday and this morn-

ing. I honestly don't see why the man hired me anyhow. If he stayed on the job he could easily do all he wants done. Sometimes I get such a creepy feeling in those big rooms with that Hindu servant sliding about on those soft-soled shoes."

"Funny, isn't it, that there should be two Hindus in this little town?" mused Kit.

"I don't like to call Mr. Rajagopal a Hindu," murmured Ann. "It sounds so heathenish, and he's such a perfect gentleman."

"Well, he surely must be different from the one up at Mr. Stratford's place," said Floss. "He's as servile and two-faced—and the horrid thing chews betel, and his teeth are all dark."

"I've read about that!" exclaimed Rollie. "Everybody chews betel in India—even the rulers—and spit the red juice into golden cuspidors."

"You might leave some things unsaid at the table," chided Ann.

"That Hindu isn't the only one who worries me," said Floss thoughtfully. "Though Mr. Stratford seems nice enough, he's too prying about our affairs."

"Maybe he's just interested in us," Ann said.

"Well, he surely has helped us out," reminded Kit. "I wonder what he did with that clock, Floss."

"Don't know, haven't ever laid my eyes on it. But he saw the ad. in the paper again yesterday about Ann's place being sold for taxes—and said he wondered that Miss Bradley's parents would let such a fine house as this be lost for a little taxes. I didn't bother to tell him that you had no intention of burdening your parents with this problem down here."

"I'm glad you didn't," said Kit. "I hate meddlers."

"Well, you know me," laughed Floss. "When anybody starts that line I shut up like a clam. But what made me really provoked with him this morning was something he said about the Bradley pearls."

"What does he know about 'em?" grunted Rollie.

"Anybody who read that will in the paper would know," Ann reminded him.

"What did he say?" asked Kit.

"He said it seemed to him that those rare

old pearls Miss Whitmore left Ann would bring enough to pay up all debts and restore the place to its former grandeur."

"Of course anybody ought to know we wouldn't be struggling along trying to raise tax money if we'd ever laid eyes on the pearls," said Ann. "But how'd you answer him, Floss?"

"I didn't! I merely asked him about an illegible word he'd scrawled on the manuscript I was copying. After he had explained he said, 'I'm hoping Miss Bradley will let me make pictures and plans of her house for my book when I've finished work at the Grenfield place. You know that Bradley place is one of the oldest on the coast.'"

"Would he pay Ann something?" asked Kit, who was rapidly developing a most mercenary trend of mind.

"Oh no," laughed Floss. "Most people are only too delighted to have their houses included in such a fine volume as he says his is going to be."

"Nobody's keen about having him prowl around here," grunted Rollie. "I wish he hadn't bought that clock."

"You've said that enough," said John rising. "I'll go 'long and see about the boat."

"And I'll ask to get off." Floss rose, too. "If I'm not back in a half hour you'll know I can't go."

But she could go and in less than a half hour the boys were rowing them toward the marsh islands. Though the way was easy to find after having been traversed once, the tide was against them. It was after five o'clock when they reached the thickly wooded island. Then to their disappointment the door of the negro cabin was closed and barred.

"My, I hate to come all this way without seeing him!" murmured Ann, sitting on a bench under a huge walnut tree.

"If he's really the Josiah who belonged to your grandfather," said Floss, "I guess he isn't far away. He never goes to Oakdale."

"Let's wait," said Kit. "I guess they'll come home to supper."

The girls found it pleasant and cool under the shady tree, but the boys were glad to explore during the absence of the owners, and soon disappeared in a strip of woods, east of the house.

Presently they came running back, jumping and dodging about to avoid prickly cacti and sharp-edged yucca.

"The old man's over there hoeing corn!" John called out.

The girls followed John to a stump-filled corn field beyond the strip of woods. At sight of the white people the old negro dropped his hoe and made his way over the rough field as fast as his stiff knees would carry him.

"Wal, if it ain't de same young uns dat comed ober las' week," was his cordial greeting.

"With two more added," explained John. "My sister and a friend."

Ann was too eager to know the truth about this anti-bellum darky to waste time in preliminaries. At once she stepped closer, looked into the black, kindly old face and asked, "Uncle, is your name Josiah?"

At this question actual terror leaped into the dim eyes. "Lawsy, Miss—dat suttinly am mah name! But how come you know um? You mus' be a fortune teller."

The others laughed, but the issue was too important for Ann to take anything lightly. "Did

you ever work for Captain William Bradley?" she asked.

"He been mah marster fer twenty year. Ah reckon Ah loved him better'n anyt'ing in dis world." Ready tears welled into the small eyes as the negro's voice grew husky with emotion. "But de wah done took him fum me, an' he fambly done gone clean away. Dis poo' nigger ain't sot eyes on us house since. Ah went to Bay Street jus' once an' dey wus sellin' us place, an' Ah swored a swear dat neber agen would Ah go to Oakdale till de fambly comed home!"

At these words strange emotions swept over the listeners. Such loyalty from this lonely soul touched them to the depths. In the interval before Ann replied, something about that still summer afternoon impressed itself on her memory. She could never forget that moment with the old man standing between rows of young corn, the late afternoon woods' shadows falling across his face, and the distant tinkle of a cow bell in the hollow near the creek. In this peaceful environment he had lived for sixty-five years, treasuring memories of youth and remaining loyal to the master he had once served.

Ann took one step closer to him and said gently, "Well, Uncle Josiah, you can go back to Oakdale now—the last of the family has come home."

"Whut dat? Whut dat you say?" cried the old man, almost startled.

"I am Ann Elizabeth Bradley!"

"Huh?" A half-hopeful expression shot across the black, lined face, but old Josiah hardly dared believe these words. "Lawsy, he'p me, Miss! You wouldn't fool er old nigger like me when Ah been waitin' all dese years," he added almost with a whimper.

"Captain Bradley was my great-grandfather," explained Ann, "and I've been living in the old house for several weeks. Judge Carter wrote me that the place had been willed to me, so I came to Carolina to see about it."

"Glory be—an' praise de Lawd!" cried the old negro, almost with a shout. "Ah always tole Liza dat mah prayers would be answered, an' de Cap'n's fambly would come home, so Ah could obey he las' order 'fore Ah die."

"His last order?" repeated Ann.

"You mean about the Bradley pearls?" asked

Rollie, no longer able to restrain his curiosity. "Do you know where the Bradley pearls are?"

"Pearls, son?" asked Josiah, rolling the whites of his eyes toward the boy at his right. "Ah ain't kno' nothin' 'bout no pearls. Ah reckon de big Miss took all her jewels 'long when she go to de plantachun. De Cap'n wus allus bringin' her trinkets fum dem furrin' countries."

At this statement the tension snapped, and John burst forth, "We're a bunch of galoots chasing all around trying to find out something about an old string of pearls. I bet they wouldn't be worth two cents if we found 'em!"

"And you never even heard of the Bradley pearls?" asked Ann, unable to give up this last shred of hope. If this old servant knew nothing of them, was there anyone in the world who did?

"No'm, Ah don't know nothin' 'bout no pearls. But Ah's ready to go back home wid y'all—an' obey de las' order o' de Cap'n."

At these words Ann shot a questioning look at her companions. Perhaps the old man's mind wasn't exactly right, for he must be well over eighty years old. No one had dreamed of tak-

ing him back to Oakdale, but the faithful Josiah had no other idea.

"Jes' let me stop by de house an' git a few t'ings togedder," he said, shouldering the hoe and starting off, "an' den Ah's ready to go home."

"Sounds like he's going back to live," whispered Floss.

"I think it would be real class to have a butler," Kit giggled. "He can stay in the old slave quarters."

"But remember he'll have to be fed," Floss said.

"Maybe we can find out something from him to help us find the pearls," mused Ann. "I couldn't refuse to let him go. Only think of the years he's been praying for my family to come home!"

The boys were walking ahead with Uncle Josiah. John realized at once that the old negro would be of valuable assistance with his fish pond. He was now bombarding him with questions. On crossing the strip of woods they saw smoke coming from the clay and stick chimney of the cabin and knew Liza was getting supper.

Old Josiah invited them to be seated on the bench under the walnut tree while he prepared for the journey. As the young people waited they could hear voices raised in argument within. Suddenly a series of wails from Angelina revealed the fact that the timid little girl was heartbroken at the idea of her great-grandfather going away.

It was already after sunset when this strange group embarked. Old Josiah was too stiff to make much progress at the oars, though he wanted to help the boys. He had donned a rumpled gray overcoat, a musty relic of war days, and had placed a small bundle on the seat beside him. On reaching the open bay, the boys insisted on taking the oars. As the lights of Oakdale twinkled into view old Josiah grew more and more reminiscent. His memory seemed especially vivid in recalling the last days before his master went off to fight, and he repeated Judge Carter's story of the approach of the northern fleet.

"So you haven't forgotten the two foreign visitors either?" asked Ann eagerly.

"Forget 'em! How could Ah forget 'em, li'l Miss, when dey hoodooed de place?"

These were the exact words that Nick had used on the night of their arrival, and Ann said curiously, "What do you mean by 'hoodooed the place'?"

"Put bad luck on it, chile. Ah allus said no good would come o' takin' in dem heathens."

"But they weren't heathens," Floss told him. "Judge Carter said they were Christians and that's why they were exiled from their own home."

"Ah know dat, but dey ain' like us folks!"

At these words Ann gave Rollie a warning pinch to prevent his snickering.

"An' wasn't us house took fum us—an' de Cap'n kilt an' de fambly run clean off? What more worser luck could dat couple bring dan dat?"

"But they had nothing to do with the war," explained John.

"And they must have been nice people if Captain Bradley entertained them in his house," added Kit.

"But de Cap'n wus good to enneybody in trouble."

While the boys rowed into the inlet that wound close to their own green bluff, Josiah continued to talk of those happy days before the war. He also asked Ann many questions about the family and how they had fared since he last saw them.

When Ann told of the death of her great-grandmother in Mississippi during the war, the old man asked, "An' you's de onliest one lef'? De Cap'n's great-granddaughter?"

"Yes," replied Ann. She had answered this question before.

"Den you is de fambly—an' de Cap'n's orders shill be obeyed."

Again Ann thought his mind had grown dim and his faculties weak, but she murmured, "What do you mean, Uncle Josiah?"

"When Ah sees de fambly in de ole house den Ah'll obey de Cap'n's orders."

There was no use of pressing him further, so Ann turned her gaze to the nearing shore lights. Was some revelation of importance to be made by this strange old negro?

The boat nosed close to their landing at last.

A lantern was needed to light their way up the slope, for the moon would not rise until much later. But old Josiah was too eager to wait. He stumbled toward the house in the darkness and the young people could hear him mumbling for joy as he disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

"Hurry," whispered Kit as John fumbled in lighting the lantern. "I want to see him when he gets there."

"I have the front door key—he'll have to wait till I let him in the back," said Ann.

A few minutes later they all trooped with Ann through the house to admit Josiah through the kitchen door. He would no more have thought of entering by the front door than of sitting down to the table with his white folks. Already he had hung his battered hat on a peg against the back porch wall. He seemed actually dazed as he came into the lighted kitchen. His gray-bearded chin was working, and he mumbled to himself while trying to see if this reality was like the old cherished dream.

"Look like it swunk up some," he said to himself. He moved slowly toward the chimney. No

one spoke. Then suddenly he seemed to come back to reality and turned quickly toward Ann.

"You is de Cap'n's great-granddaughter, ain't you?" he asked again, his voice quavering.

"I've told you several times that I was," replied Ann almost impatiently. "Why do you keep asking?"

"I wouldn't want to make no mistake—disobey orders after all dese years," was the reply.

Floss, who sensed that this moment in some way marked a vital culmination in the old man's life, moved closer and said, "We all can vouch for her being Captain Bradley's only living descendant, and if you want to be still more sure you can ask Judge Carter about it."

"T'ank you, Miss, for dem plain words. Ah ain't doubtin' nobody, but Ah don' want to make no mistake after all dese years."

Slowly he unfastened the brass buttons of the heavy coat and from an inside pocket took a yellowed envelope. Ann could hear Rollie breathing hard as the old negro extended it to her.

"De las' t'ing de Cap'n do befo' he went off was to gib me dis letter an' say, 'Gib it to mah wife or any o' de fambly when dey come home,

Josiah.' Ah don' know whut in it—Ah can't read de writin' nohow, an' ain't neber broke de seal, but dem was de Cap'n's las' orders—an' t'ank Gawd Ah done lib to obey 'em."

Ann's hand was shaking as she took the wax-sealed envelope, bearing the name of her great-grandmother. Carefully she slit the brittle flap, and opened a folded, finely written sheet. The next moment she cried out for sheer joy, " Oh, listen, everybody! It tells where the pearls are!"

CHAPTER XIII

EVIDENCE OF PROWLERS

ANN'S announcement was like an electric shock. Only Josiah stood gaping, not understanding why this long unopened letter had created such excitement.

"Read it!" urged John.

"'Dearest Lucy,'" Ann began reading her great-grandfather's faded writing. "'The call came to-day and I am ready to help my southland. It seems inevitable that the town will be occupied. Only the Heavenly Father knows what the outcome will be. I have sent Rajagopal and his ——'"

Ann read no further before Kit interrupted, "Why, that's the name of the young man who came to ask about the pearls!"

"Exactly—but just wait!" exclaimed Ann breathlessly. "Listen. 'I have sent Rajagopal and his young wife away from the war zone. I gave them two horses, provisions and money. In

return for our hospitality they insisted on giving me the lovely string of pearls which Chandra always wore. As you know this was the most treasured possession they brought into exile. I have no way of sending those pearls to you at this late hour, but will hide them in the hollow space, of which you know, in the sundial.' "

" Sundial! " repeated Rollie, actually on tiptoes with eagerness.

" There's no sundial here! " wailed John.

" In course dey is! " asserted Josiah, speaking for the first time since he had handed over the note.

" But go on—let's hear the rest," Floss said quietly. She was the most self-possessed of them all.

" ' I shall entrust this note with our faithful Josiah, who will stay at the house unless forced away. Try not to worry, dear Lucy. I shall send you letters whenever possible. We are in God's hands. Kiss our boy for me, and much love to yourself from your devoted husband, William.' "

Rollie could scarcely wait until the last words were out before turning to the old negro.

"Where is the sundial?" he wanted to know at once.

"Right dere in de gyrden."

"There's been no sundial here since we came," Ann told him, shaking her head.

"Ain't nobody hab a right to move de Cap'n's sundial," grunted Josiah. "Ah couldn't neber tell de time o' day by it, but Marster could."

"Where was it?" asked Kit. "Could you show us where it used to be?"

"In course Ah could, an' if de Marster hid dem pearls dere, dey belongs to de li'l Miss. Fetch de lantern, son," he said humbly, turning to John. "Ah ain't always certain o' mah steps in de night."

John was ready for action almost before the request was made. They all trooped after him to the porch and down the back steps. There was yet no hint of a moon and the still, warm stars overhead had little power to light the shadowy lawns beneath the great oaks.

Kit was scarcely down the back steps when she shied like a frightened colt and gripped Ann's arm. "Did you hear something back there?" she whispered.

Ann glanced at a clump of bushes near the kitchen window, and, as she expected, saw nothing. "Don't let this business get on your nerves," she cautioned.

The boys, one on each side of Uncle Josiah, were bombarding him with questions. The three girls followed close behind. Once or twice the old negro paused, trying to get his bearings in the darkness.

"Somebody done ruint dis gyrden," he moaned. "Trees down an' flower beds tore up."

"What a queer place to hide valuable pearls anyhow," said John. "Anybody could have found them out in a garden in a sundial."

"But dat was safer dan de house," explained Uncle Josiah. "Ah reckon de Cap'n was feared dey'd burn down de house."

"Don't talk so loud," cautioned Kit, who had an annoying impulse to look behind her every few minutes.

At last Uncle Josiah paused at the top of the slope, where John and Rollie had built the winding path to the fish pond. He took the lantern from the boy's hand and, holding it high, peered beneath the shadowy trees.

"Right here's where hit ought to be," he mumbled, half to himself. "Right in de middle here —wid green grass all around, an' pretty colored flowers in beds back dere. Who done move de Cap'n's sundial?" he almost wailed. "Ain't nobody had no right to tech it!"

"I should say not," burst forth Rollie. "With the pearls in it! If it had been left alone we could find the pearls right now!"

"Please don't get so excited and talk so loud," cautioned Kit. "There's no telling who might be prowling around under these dark trees."

They went down the stepping stones to the fish pond which had been flooded several days before. The water now lay so still and peaceful in the high tide that the stars were mirrored in its surface. A long-legged crane had ventured close to try her skill at capturing some of John's imprisoned fish, and made a bright spot amid the numerous water plants.

"Maybe the sundial got turned over and buried in the sand," Ann speculated, loath to give up hope.

Josiah shook his head. "Somebody done carry it off bodily, Ah reckon."

"Anyhow to-morrow we can see to hunt better," Floss said. "Maybe Uncle Josiah can't tell in the darkness just where it was."

"Ah couldn't make no mistake about dat, Miss," replied the old man. "Dey was all settin' out by de sundial when de boy comed wid de news dat de Cap'n had to go. Dat picture been in mah mind clear as day eber since. Hit were right dere at de top o' de walk where de Cap'n could see ships comin' to'd de harbor."

They went toward the north and by the carriage house and ruins of the old slave quarters. But the search was fruitless as Ann had known it would be before they started out. In returning they crossed the bluff above the fish pond.

Entranced by the beauty of the night, Kit and Ann paused a moment before going in. Arching branches of a live oak made a dark frame for a marsh scene picturing ragged palms silhouetted against a purple, star-studded sky. Suddenly the white crane fluttered up from the pond as though startled, and winged its way swiftly toward the marshes.

"Something frightened it!" whispered Kit with bated breath.

"It certainly seemed so," Ann was forced to admit.

"I've had a feeling all evening that there was somebody else in the garden."

"We've had an unusually exciting day," said Ann, trying to throw off the unpleasant sensation that had gripped her too. "I guess we'll all feel better if we go in and have some supper—and too, we've got to provide a place for Uncle Josiah to sleep."

In spite of Ann's calmness Kit could not get over the eerie feeling that had possessed her all evening and her sleep was troubled. Though she was generally the most sleepy-headed of the three girls she was up before either of the others next morning. Early as she was Uncle Josiah was ahead of her and already had a roaring fire in the kitchen stove. No exiled soul returned to his kingdom had ever been happier than the old negro that morning. Lost pearls and pending tax payments could not dim his joy at once more being able to serve his folks.

While Kit washed a sauce pan of hominy and set it on to boil the old negro asked her many questions. He wanted to know what relation

the four of the household were to his little Miss. His mind had been too filled with other matters on the previous evening to take in all these facts. Kit was in the midst of explanations when Rollie dashed across the back porch, and popped his head through the door, his eyes fairly bulging.

"Kit, Kit—come here!" he panted.

Kit hurried toward the door to find Rollie already running down the back steps. Thinking that surely he had stumbled on the sundial, or perhaps the pearls, themselves, Kit followed across the lawn and toward the fish pond. John was there, too, standing amid the vines and ferns that he had planted in such luxurious profusion around the blue oval of water. He was gazing steadily at something among the vines. Kit's heart bounded hopefully. Had they really found the sundial?

"What is it?" she at last asked Rollie, as the boy was forced to pick his way more slowly along the bank.

"Look—what we found on this stone!" said John. He was kneeling among the plants now.

Kit bent closer and saw a long red stain on the rough stone. For an instant she thought it

blood. Since she had expected to find the sundial, or perhaps the pearls she felt provoked at the boys.

"Shucks!" she exclaimed. "I thought sure you'd found something important."

"That is important—very!" grunted John.

"What does it look like to you?" asked Rollie.

"A streak of blood—maybe from a wounded bird or something."

"It looks like a streak of blood all right, but I'll bet it's not," said John.

Kit looked from one serious boy's face to the other.

"I don't get you," she murmured.

"Does that look like betel juice to you?" asked Rollie tensely.

"Why—why, I don't know! I never saw any betel juice," faltered Kit. In swift remembrance she recalled their conversation of the previous day about the Hindus chewing betel. She stood up, her face white. "John—Rollie!" she exclaimed. "Do you suppose that Hindu, Situ, from Mr. Stratford's house was in the garden last night when we were hunting the sundial?"

"Seems like it to me," stated John. "I know

that stain wasn't on that stone yesterday morning when I set out these plants."

"And I thought I heard someone in the shrubbery once or twice," Kit told them.

"I heard you and Ann talking about the crane flying away so suddenly from the pond," said John. "I had a hunch somebody might be down here in the darkness—so I came hunting tracks this morning—and that's what I found."

"If it was Situ," said Kit, "his tracks would be long and narrow. I've noticed his pointed slippers several times when I was in Mr. Stratford's waiting for Floss."

"Maybe he was listening and even heard Ann reading the letter about the pearls," said Rollie.

"We should worry about them getting the pearls when we ourselves can't even find the sundial," grunted John.

At breakfast they told Ann and Floss of this discovery and their deductions.

"Situ would be capable of sneaking around like that," Floss said.

"The whole business seems to get more balled up every day," Ann sighed wearily. "I wonder how it will all end?"

She had scarcely finished speaking when the big brass knocker on the front door echoed through the hall. At the sound Uncle Josiah appeared in the pantry door, arrayed in a white coat he had procured from nobody-knew-where. Ann had half risen to answer the knock, but Uncle Josiah crossed the dining room, saying eagerly, "Dat's mah job now, li'l Miss. You jes' set right down."

Kit giggled and when he was in the hall, said with a grandiose air, "Aren't we some class?"

Scarcely had the front door opened when they heard Uncle Josiah's feet shuffling down the hall much too fast for dignity. Little but the whites of his eyes were showing and his whole frame was actually quivering when he rushed into the dining room.

"Lawsy he'p us, li'l Miss," he said through chattering teeth. "De heathen prince done comed back to claim he pearls."

"What?" cried Ann. There was a general uprising as she went closer to the frightened negro.

"Dat heathen Hindu out dere—an' say he want to speak to Miss Bradley. An' Lawsy

he'p us, li'l Miss. It's been sixty-five year since he were here befo' an' he ain't growed one day older!" His shaking knees would hold his weight no longer. He collapsed in a chair which John thrust under him. "He must er done died an' dis he ha'nt. Ha'nts allus stay young."

Ann and Floss were making their way toward the door to learn the cause of their old servant's terror. Kit, John and Rollie at mention of a Hindu had naturally thought only of the night prowler.

But Ann's light laugh in the hall and her voice greeting someone cordially brought them all instant relief. "Oh, it's Mr. Rajagopal! Do come in!"

"I seem to have startled your servant," said Mr. Rajagopal. He followed Ann and Floss toward the old-fashioned parlor when Ann had introduced her friend.

"Yes," admitted Ann. "He used to know an Indian gentleman years ago when he was my great-grandfather's slave—and I guess he thought you were his ghost—or something."

"Quite a natural mistake," said Rajagopal calmly. "The Indian he knew was my own

great-grandfather. Our family resemblance is very striking they say."

At these words Ann's eyes grew wide. Floss' expression showed her amazement. Evidently the others were in the hall for at that moment Rollie sneaked through the door and sat down self-consciously in the nearest chair.

"Then—then he was the guest in this house at the time of the war—and—and gave Captain Bradley that string of pearls."

Rajagopal's face seldom showed what he felt, but at this he looked up surprised. "Then you have learned additional facts since I was here last."

"Yes—last night," admitted Ann, "through this same old slave, Uncle Josiah." She turned toward Floss as though seeking aid and finally said, "I think we might show Mr. Rajagopal the letter, don't you?"

"Certainly. The missing pearls seem as important to him as to us," answered Floss.

"They could be no more important to any human being than to me," answered the young man seriously. "I came in this morning at this early hour to tell you that I must go away for a

short time, and ask you to observe the utmost caution during my absence. Should you by any chance find the pearls do not keep them in this house one hour. Ask your friend Judge Carter to place them in the safety vault in the bank until my return when we may make some arrangement about the selling price."

" You seem to think they will really be found," said Floss, a rather skeptical note in her voice.

" I sincerely hope so," said Rajagopal in a low tone. " Though it is merely a woman's bauble, that string of pearls is of the utmost importance to my family."

Ann returned in a moment bringing the yellowed envelope. When their guest had read it he said, " Yes, that coincides exactly with the story that has been passed down through our family. My great-grandfather and his wife did go west —all the way to California eventually. They found gold, and the family has had every comfort since. Though we have all had university educations, have traveled and possess all that money can buy we are not satisfied. There are other things more vital to us—and on the finding of those pearls hinges much—oh, much! "

"But if the sundial is not even left here—why hope any longer?" exclaimed Ann.

"I will not give up hope! We will see what further investigation will reveal. On such an errand I am leaving this morning."

There was an awkward pause. Ann felt annoyed at the realization that the young man was not being as frank with her as she with him. She was trying to find words to voice this feeling when suddenly Rollie spoke up.

"Mr.—Mr. Raja—do you chew betel?"

At this unexpected question the young Indian suddenly broke into a merry laugh. Ann's face flushed with embarrassment, but she was relieved to see that Rajagopal took no offense.

"Why no, I don't, son. Though it's quite a common custom in India. I don't chew betel just as some American gentlemen don't chew tobacco."

"And that's enough from you, Rollie," said Ann severely. "You may leave the room."

When he had gone Rajagopal smiled and said, "Boys are so interesting. I wonder why he asked that question?"

"Tell him," suggested Floss, when Ann shot

her a questioning look. "I think we'll get at the root of this mystery quicker by being perfectly frank." And Ann knew that her words had double meaning.

When Rajagopal had heard of their discovery of the betel stain he said seriously, "There are unfriendly eyes watching the outcome of this whole affair, and I beg of you to talk to no one outside the family and to keep your search as secret as possible. This information makes my journey still more urgent. I must hurry, but will let you know as soon as I return."

A few minutes later Rajagopal bade them good morning and started down the front steps. The girls, turning back toward the dining room, did not see two boys bob up from behind the japonica bush and waylay their foreign friend.

"Mr. Raja," began Rollie, and his voice was a little shaky for he was surprised at his own boldness, "will you just come down to our pond a minute and take a look at this stain on the stone?"

"You see, we aren't sure it's betel juice," explained John. "But if it is, we know Situ was sneaking around the garden last night."

Rajagopal glanced at his watch. "I will take

time," he said. "I have forty minutes before my train leaves."

They turned toward the pond. While they sprinted over the neatly cut lawn Rollie talked as fast as he could. "We thought maybe you'd been to India and would know betel juice better'n we do."

"You have been to India, haven't you?" asked John.

"Oh yes—many times, and if it is so decreed I hope to spend many more years there."

By this time they had reached the pond. After Rajagopal saw the stone which John pointed out he walked around the pond, examining the soft earth carefully.

"Yes, I think Situ has been here. Our further investigation will have to be more secret. He undoubtedly heard that note read."

"We could have him arrested for sneakin' around our place!" flared Rollie.

"Such a proceeding would only focus public attention on a search that we must keep most private!" exclaimed Rajagopal, with much more emotion than he generally displayed. "Your sister has warned you to secrecy. Above all peo-

ple this Stratford and his ignorant, and evil-minded servants are to be feared!"

"I thought he had only one—Situ?" cried John.

"He has another, though I think he has not been with Stratford since he came to Oakdale."

"Then you knew them before they came here?" cried Rollie.

"Oh yes—but we waste time in idle chatter," said Rajagopal, as though suddenly realizing he had said too much. "I scarcely have time to make my train."

He turned abruptly and started back up the walk. But Rollie, fascinated by this young man whose mind was a treasure-house of facts, followed him all the way across the yard.

"I wish you had time to tell me about India," he said wistfully. "I've read stories about it, but that's not like hearin' someone who's really been there."

"It is the most interesting country in the world!" stated Rajagopal. "But I haven't time to talk now. Maybe some day I shall tell you much, or you may even go there to visit." Suddenly he paused and turned toward the boy, his

fine face lighting into a smile. "In the meantime I will mail you some books. You love to read?" he added questioningly.

"Oh, more than anything in the world!"

"Then you will be fascinated by the travel books and stories of my people. You will read of their religions and customs so different from yours, their pitiful superstitions, and you will be sorry for such poor souls as Situ, ignorant and in the power of such a man as Stratford."

"But I thought Situ was your enemy?" asked the boy wondering.

"No man can harm me—the real me," said the Hindu seriously. "But Situ feels himself my enemy because his little soul cannot understand that I want to help him and others like him." He hurried on, saying, "The hour is late. I must not talk longer, but will send you something to read."

As Rajagopal turned down Oakland Street Rollie looked wistfully after him, thinking him the most interesting man he had ever met, and he wondered if he would be too busy to remember about the books.

CHAPTER XIV

PIGGLES

Uncle Josiah settled himself in the Bradley home as though he had never been away. He selected a room in the old slave quarters which still boasted a lichen-covered top. Jim Dawkins had discarded some fairly good shingles when repairing the big house. With the boys' assistance Uncle Josiah used these to patch his leaky roof. The rotting floor was restored by using the best boards from other cabins of the quarters.

In return for his shelter and food Uncle Josiah gave ample service. In spite of his age he set about trimming hedges, and cutting dead limbs from the long-neglected live oaks. The boys sawed the branches from the trees while the old man cut them into firewood for the kitchen stove. Soon the spacious grounds assumed something of their former well-kept appearance.

Three days after Rajagopal's departure Rollie received a box of fascinating books about In-

dia. He was never seen without one in his hands unless he was being coerced into labor. Uncle Josiah could get more work out of him than any of the others by promises of fishing trips and excursions to interesting islands in the marsh.

At odd moments the boys were engaged in carrying on a new line of investigation. They had begun a systematic survey of the town in hopes of finding the Bradley sundial.

"Maybe Miss Hannah sold it," Rollie suggested to John. "She was so hard up, you know."

"Who would buy anything from this old place? We can't even sell the furniture!"

"But a sundial wouldn't be likely to be hoodooed," explained Rollie. "Anything out in the open—on the lawn like that. Anyhow there's no harm in lookin' around."

John's jobs on the paper route and as paint delivery boy proved a blessing now. He formed a habit of delivering paint at back doors, as this gave him a chance to survey the entire premises. In delivering papers where he suspected a sundial might be hidden in the shrubbery he often threw the paper too far, making an excuse to

enter the grounds and carry the paper politely to the porch. But there were many fine homes, surrounded by spacious grounds that couldn't be explored by subterfuge.

The boys began frequenting alleys and side streets just after dawn when few people were about. From the tops of board fences or through openings in protecting hedges they viewed all the fine grounds of Oakdale. Finally three sundials were located. By crafty detective work they learned that two of these had been carved and sold by the local stone cutter. The third, in the Smithfields' garden was very old and hence held more hope.

Finally they confided in Judge Carter, for Ann had told their old friend at once of Josiah delivering her great-grandfather's note.

"You boys are on a wild goose chase," laughed the judge. "You'd be better off to give up the idea of those pearls and settle down to hard work."

"If Miss Hannah sold the sundial to the Smithfields and the pearls are hidden inside—we've got a right to 'em! They're Ann's," declared John.

"I'm not so sure about that, my boy," answered the judge. "If a sundial is sold, the whole thing and everything in it belongs to the purchaser. But I have no idea that sundial on the Smithfield lawn ever belonged to Captain Bradley. As far back as I can remember it's been there, and if I recollect right it's not the same kind as the captain owned. Yes, I know I'm right! Captain Bradley's sundial had a four-sided pedestal and Smithfields' is round. I wasn't anything but a little shaver the last time I remember noticing the captain's dial, but I'm certain about the pedestal."

"Do you suppose the northern soldiers carried it off?" Rollie asked gloomily.

"They carried off many things from this town. It's more than likely somebody took a fancy to that sundial. It certainly hasn't been there in late years since I've been going back and forth to the house looking after Miss Hannah's affairs."

At this discouraging information the boys ambled toward the door. Judge Carter, having nothing else to do, followed them to the little

porch. "After all, boys," he said, "hard work is the best way to get what you want."

"We're working hard, too," John told him. "I'm delivering papers and paint, and pretty soon I'll be ready to sell water plants and fancy fish. At home I could get good prices for 'em, but it seems hard to sell anything here."

The judge always kept Nick close to run errands, and he was now lolling on the front steps. At John's mention of water plants he grinned broadly.

"Ah could show you where dere's heaps o' plants in a sort o' lagoon," he said. "Jedge know where 'tis—over to Shady Cove."

"It must be the same place Jim Dawkins was talking about," said Rollie.

"Ah reckon it am," admitted the boy. "Me an' Mr. Jim been dere heaps o' times fishin'. Dere's plenty o' fish, but Ah wouldn't like to be kotch ober dere atter dark. Ah reckon dere's plenty o' ghosses too."

"Nick's always looking for spooks," laughed the judge. "I expect the old bad man himself will catch him some day, he's so triflin'."

"We are going out this afternoon to hunt

plants," said John. "How about coming along?"

Nick grinned happily and glanced at Judge Carter. "If de boss let me off," he said, craftily watching the old man's face.

"I don't mind. I'm glad to see these boys doing something to bring in money." He turned back to John and Rollie. "Time's flying! We'll soon have to do something about those taxes."

As the boys turned to leave the judge added, "Oh, you must tell Miss Ann about the girls' camp that is to be opened to-morrow on the beach south of the park. Maybe she could make a little extra money selling them candies and knick-knacks."

That afternoon the boys borrowed Jim's boat, and with Uncle Josiah and Nick started for Shady Cove. To John the place proved a veritable paradise, filled with many lovely plants he had never seen before. To Rollie's highly-imaginative mind, stimulated by too much reading, it seemed the most gruesome, spooky place he had ever visited. The lagoon, in which myriads of water hyacinths blossomed, was a long arm of the inlet running far back into a swampy is-

land. Towering oaks and cypress, canopied with tangled vines, shut out the sun. In the green-scummed water, through which Nick pushed the boat, grew trees with moisture-swollen trunks. Far back in the jungle of the shore they glimpsed a weather-beaten shack.

"Who would live in such an awful place?" asked Rollie.

"Nobody," replied Nick. "But one time me an' Mr. Jim went up dere out o' a thunder storm. Nex' time Ah'll take de rain!"

"Why?" asked John.

"Too spooky!" shivered the little negro. "Lizards crawlin' all around, spider webs in de rafters, an' green moss on de roof. Places like dat is where ha'nts an' murderers hides."

Rollie was thankful when John had all the wild plants he could carry, and they returned to more open spaces for fishing. It had proven quite a saving on their living expenses to eat fish twice a day, and the boys felt that they were really helping by these frequent fishing excursions.

Just after sunset John and Rollie were near the back steps separating the tangled water plants, while Uncle Josiah cleaned fish for sup-

per. Suddenly a strange pair came upon this busy scene; a negro woman, and a very dark-skinned, big-eyed little girl. For a moment neither of the boys recognized this mother and child. Then Uncle Josiah looked up and exclaimed in delight, "Lawsy, he'p us, Liza! How come you an' Angelina here?"

"Dis gal done 'bout cried her eyes out since you leabe," said Liza, walking awkwardly in stiff patent leather slippers. "Henry Slocum wus comin' ober to de Tabernacle Jubilee. Ah ax him to fetch us so dis chile could see her Grampah."

"An' glad Ah is to see you, honey," crooned Uncle Josiah. "Ah hongry fer mah chile, but Ah's got to stay here wid mah white folks. Dey couldn't git along widout me."

"Ah wants to stay wid you," said Angelina with a half-sob as she sidled against the old man's arm.

"Us gwine stay to-night if Grampah got any place to sleep us," promised Liza.

"In course de li'l Miss'll let y'all sleep right down dere in de quarters wid me." Uncle Josiah felt quite certain of Bradley hospitality.

And Ann was delighted to have them stay, for she saw at once that Liza could be a great help. She had decided to sell sandwiches to the beach campers next day, and Liza agreed to make the sales for her.

"Time's simply flying," said Ann, when they were making their preparations early the following morning. "We must earn every penny we can."

"Everybody's made more than I have," moaned Kit. "What a failure I've been at selling antiques!" She was slicing bread as vigorously as though such a display of energy would hasten their accumulation of the necessary funds.

"I'm still hoping somebody will come from the tourist ship," said Ann. "But I'd like for the house to be cleaner than it is in case they want to see furniture in other rooms."

"We could help clean up—me an' Angelina," volunteered Liza, who was washing breakfast dishes.

"But we haven't any money to pay you," said Ann frankly.

"Don' worry your sweet self 'bout dat, Miss

Ann," said Liza liberally. " We's only too glad to he'p Grampah's white folks."

Ann finally decided to accept their assistance, for the untidy house had been a great source of annoyance ever since her arrival. When Kit and Liza drove down to the camp grounds, she and Angelina began housecleaning. The wiry little girl was as capable as one twice her size.

At noon Liza and Kit returned, proudly displaying four dollars and eighty cents in nickels and dimes. " It was exactly the time to go," said Kit happily. " They were just getting settled and hadn't had time to fix themselves anything to eat."

Kit and Liza helped with the cleaning after lunch and by late afternoon the lower floor was in perfect order. As the girls were dressing for supper Kit said, " I think we ought to give Liza and Angelina something. Of course we can't spare any money, but some old clothes might make them just as happy."

" My pink flowered dress would fit Liza—it's too big for me," said Ann.

" And that old red hat of mine ought to tickle

Angelina to pieces. Angelina—what a peach of a name!" laughed Kit.

Armed with these contributions the girls went to the back porch where the mother and daughter were resting. Uncle Josiah sat smoking on the steps near by.

"Now, honey, you shouldn't do dat!" exclaimed Liza when Ann presented her offering. Nevertheless she grinned broadly and her eyes shone with delight at sight of the flowered dress.

"And this is for you, Angelina," said Kit, holding up the hat.

"Yas'm, t'ank ee, ma'am," said the little girl backing off shyly. She didn't smile, for she seldom changed her expression in the presence of white people.

"Show yer raisin', gal, an' teck de hat when de lady gib it to you," ordered Liza.

"Oh, I want to see how it looks on her!" exclaimed Kit. "It may be a little large. I can make it smaller by taking up the ribbon band."

At this Angelina backed off still farther. Her hand went instinctively to the white cap which had covered her numerous pigtails since her arrival.

" You needn't be 'shamed to teck off yer cap," chided her mother. " Ain't dey done seed you bare-headed back home, an' me always shamin' you 'bout goin' round widout no headcloth."

Ann and Kit exchanged surprised glances. This was a form of modesty in the negro code of which they had never heard. As the discussion proceeded, Angelina kept her hand firmly pressed on the white cap. Then suddenly Uncle Josiah moved toward her, exclaiming angrily, " Teck off dat cap, gal, an' try on de hat like de white folks tell you! "

Angelina scowled and dodged. Then Uncle Josiah's hand shot out and snatched the cap from her head. As he did so a small package fell to the floor. At this unexpected occurrence shrieks of laughter rose from the boys, who had been interested spectators in the back yard.

Painfully and without a word Uncle Josiah bent and picked up the bundle. Slowly he unwrapped the paper and revealed a small square of cheese.

" Stealin'—Liza, your chile been stealin' de white folks' food! "

Liza made a lunge at the girl, who darted

behind her grandfather. " Ah'll beat you—Ah'll beat you till you can't set down!" screeched the angry woman.

" Oh, don't strike her!" exclaimed Ann. " Maybe she was hungry. Maybe we didn't give her enough to eat."

" She ain't hongry!" Liza was actually trembling in her rage. " She jus' plain got de debil in her! She ain't taste de cheese many times an' jus' kase she like um she hab to go an' steal fum de white folks whut's been good to her Grampah!"

Angelina, with her exposed pigtails standing at all angles, peered with rolling eyes from behind her grandfather's broad back. " Don' beat her dis time, Liza," pleaded the old man, who repented his anger the moment his granddaughter's flared. " Ah'll make her pray off her sins. You leabe her here wid me an' Ah'll take her to meetin' till she find de Lawd."

Thus Angelina's need of salvation was the cause of another member being added to Ann's household. From that day the boys insisted that she no longer had a right to the name Angelina, so they dubbed her Piggles.

But more important events soon caused Piggles and her misconduct to slip into the background. In the mail next morning Ann received a letter in which a Richard Harrison expressed an interest in buying Ann's house. Again only a post-box address was given.

"That would be the quickest and easiest way out of all the trouble," said Kit. "But who wants to sell now?"

"That's why we came here," Ann reminded them in a low tone, "but I can't bear the idea either."

"I should say not!" burst forth Rollie, "when we're gettin' hotter on the trail of the pearls every day. And even if we didn't need the money I'd want to find those pearls for the Raja's sake. Gee, but I like that man! I wonder why he doesn't come back?"

"I wish he would," murmured Kit. "I believe he'd lend Ann that tax money just to keep anybody else from buying in the house till we find the pearls."

"Shucks! I've given up the idea of finding that sundial with the pearls on this place!" John mercilessly threw cold water on all their hopes.

While the others argued, Floss sat at the lunch table examining Ann's letter. Presently she said with a tone of conviction, "This letter was written on the typewriter I use every day."

"Aw, go on! You're imagining things!" laughed Kit.

"What makes you think so?" asked Ann.

"Because the top of the t doesn't record clearly, and the e is a little out of line—and—and too, the type is perfectly clean. Few people keep their machines as clean as I keep mine."

"Yes. I remember noticing those letters on our antique furniture ads," admitted Kit.

"And there's another reason why I'm sure this letter was written in our office," continued Floss. "Yesterday when I went back from lunch Mr. Stratford was just opening a message which Situ had brought in. My glasses were blurred and as I went into the office I took them off to clean them. You know I can read across a room without my glasses better than I can distinguish things close and I saw every word of that message. It was a cablegram!"

"Cablegram!" exclaimed Rollie. "That would come across the ocean."

"Exactly," stated Floss. "This came from Ranguna, India."

"India!" echoed the amazed Rollie.

"What was the message?" asked Kit.

"I never would have thought of it again if this letter hadn't come to Ann. Now I'm beginning to link everything up. The message merely said, 'Stop at nothing to prevent return of prince. Purchase is authorized.'"

"Purchase is authorized!" repeated Ann. "Surely no one would be sending a cablegram about buying my house!"

"I feel certain it was about this house," stated Floss emphatically. "Mr. Stratford evidently wrote this note under an assumed name after getting that message. I'm beginning to see it all now—why he hired me. Oh, I wish I hadn't answered any of his prying questions. Ann, he certainly wants to buy this house—and—and I don't believe he's straight. We're somehow mixed up in a strange, mysterious affair. Mercy knows where it will end!"

CHAPTER XV

CAUGHT

THE very fact that Mr. Stratford was trying to make negotiations for the purchase of her house under an assumed name seemed proof enough to Ann that there was some strange, and perhaps unscrupulous motive back of the whole proceeding. They discussed the question until they were so entangled in speculations they scarcely knew facts from imagined motives.

Finally Ann carried the letter to Judge Carter. This kindly old gentleman had been not only a wise counselor to the young people, but the source of very great comfort to Ann's parents. Though Ann had insisted that the judge keep secret the struggle they were going through, she knew that her stepfather had written several letters, inquiring about the welfare of his family.

Ann was still bound by her promise to Mr. Rajagopal to tell no one of his interest in the Bradley pearls, but she went at once to Judge Carter with her misgivings about Mr. Stratford.

" I'm beginning to believe, too," she said, " that he was the one who advertised for the Bradley pearls when we first came here. A post-office box address was given then, you remember, and this letter gives only a box address, though it is a different one."

" I can't see why Mr. Stratford—a perfect stranger to these parts and an Englishman, should be interested in a string of pearls that belonged to Captain Bradley years ago."

" But we think," explained Ann, " or at least Floss does, that he once lived in India. You know he has that Hindu servant and the cable came from India."

" And you believe he may know about the Hindu couple the captain befriended? "

" Exactly! "

The judge was thoughtfully silent a moment before he added, " I've rather regretted sending Miss Florence to Stratford. I don't like the way he's running around with those tourists from the ship. It's a wild crowd! "

" Oh, Floss can take care of herself," declared Ann.

" I'm certain of that," stated Judge Carter.

"That's why I haven't suggested that she give up the work—and you need the money. If you youngsters can make up those taxes, you won't have to sell to anybody who's questionable. You know, Miss Ann, I would have offered to help you out long ago, but it's all I can do to scrape together my own taxes since old age is creeping on me."

"Oh, I understand. There's no reason why you should think of it. You've been good enough just befriending us. And we're making progress, you know," she added a little proudly. "We may get all the money in time."

Again the judge was silent. Then suddenly he took his pipe from his mouth and leaning across the desk toward Ann, said in a brighter tone, "Even if the property has to go for taxes, remember you have a year in which to redeem it —by paying ten per cent. interest on the purchase money."

"Yes, but that's just what I can't afford to do! Anyhow if somebody takes over the place—even for a short time—they may locate the sundial and get the pearls."

"Tut-tut, child! Forget those pearls!"

"I've thought of them more than ever since Uncle Josiah brought me that note," admitted Ann.

"Well, you'd better put all your thoughts on this tax question," said the judge a little impatiently. "But I'll tell you another thing you might do—in case you don't get enough money by the second Tuesday in August. Write to this Harrison, saying you'll give him a definite answer by the second Monday in August. Of course if you can't get the tax money together it would be foolish to give up the house to the tax authorities when you have a chance to sell. It would be too late to find the pearls then anyhow."

"No, I guess we'll never find them," moaned Ann. "But I can't bear to give up the house. I've come to love it so, and I keep thinking how quickly Dad could get well here, and how happy the boys are."

"If you accept this offer all your worries will end." Judge Carter's voice held a challenge. "It will surely bring plenty of money for your musical education. You ought to study with the best teachers, Miss Ann. People have been saying nice things about your voice."

Ann shot her old friend a quick glance. He surprised her by voicing the very thoughts that had kept her torn with indecision ever since receiving that letter. She did not want to be selfish. She must not think of her own ambitions when the family so needed her in this crisis. What would life have been without the kindly stepfather, who had always treated her as his own? This was the first real opportunity she had had to prove her gratitude. How ideal it would be if the old house could be saved for their future home! There was a branch office of her father's firm only fifteen miles away, and Ann felt certain he could secure a transfer to this part of the country.

The girl brought herself back from these dreams with a start. The judge was waiting to know her opinion of his plan, and she promised him to write the letter to Mr. Harrison, as he advised.

After that the days slipped by all too fast. They had heard nothing from Rajagopal since Rollie received the books from the New Jersey town. They gave up all idea that he might come back in time to help them through the emergency.

"It's just up to us," stated John, one afternoon during the first week in August. "I believe that sundial's somewhere in this town and we've got to find it. Girls can't go poking about like we can."

"Well, we've poked every place I can think of," replied Rollie gloomily. "And we've listened to stories of Civil War days from every long-bearded man in town, hoping for clues about what happened at this place in war days."

"None of them believe any stuff was carried away from the Bradley house. Old man Blackwell says it's one of the few places where the furniture was left, and he thinks it's because Captain Bradley was a Mason, and some officers who occupied the house during the war were Masons."

"Of course the house is chug-full of antiques, and plenty of things that must've been bought by a sea captain," admitted Rollie.

On Saturday afternoon of the first week in August, John rushed across the yard to where Rollie sat curled up in the shade reading one of his books on India.

"Jimminy Christmas! Come quick, Rollie!

I've found another sundial!" he said in a tense whisper.

"Honest!" exclaimed Rollie, his book falling to the ground unnoticed. "Where?"

"In that walled garden behind the hotel. You know in that plot of ground that runs down to the bay—and—and Rollie, it's real old, all moss-grown—and—and has a square pedestal."

"Come on, let's see it! Gosh, John, that must be it! Maybe Miss Hannah sold it when they built the tourist hotel. How'd you happen to find it?"

"I went up there to try to sell some of my cabomba and water poppies to the gardener for that pool south of the hotel, and he left the gate open. So I hung around till he went back there to put away his tools, and Jimminy, I almost fell over when I saw that sundial right there in a corner of the garden!"

"John, that's where the pearls are! I know that's where the pearls are!" exclaimed Rollie joyously.

"I'm hoping so!" said John. "But how're we going to get 'em?"

"We could buy the sundial."

"Gee, that might take everything we've saved toward the taxes, and then maybe the old pearls wouldn't be inside—you never can tell."

"But I could just bet it's the sundial that used to be here," argued Rollie. "You know a modern tourist hotel couldn't buy a moss-covered dial like that at a stone cutter's. It would have to come from some old garden. Say, John, maybe that gardener knows where it came from."

"You must think I'm dumb! Of course I asked him about it, but he's only been at the hotel a year. All those garden things were there when he came. But I had to go easy. I didn't want him to think I was too interested. He might get suspicious."

The boys sat there silently a while, their knees drawn up under their chins. "Wouldn't it be fun to find the pearls—and s'prise Ann," murmured Rollie.

"Ann's been bully to us," agreed John. "Gee, but I'd like to live here all the time. I could never get any kick out of a little aquarium in the house again after having the fresh water fish pool and that dandy old pond down there."

"Uh-huh," grunted Rollie whose thoughts

were far from the limpid pond. The afternoon was still and peaceful and emerald patches of sunlight lay on the closely mowed lawn. From the kitchen window floated Piggles' voice, crooning a negro spiritual in a thin, childish soprano. Uncle Josiah's low-voiced accompaniment was like deep tones of an organ. The old negro was happy among the familiar scenes of his youth, and Angelina was perfectly content to be with the grandfather who adored her. Since the afternoon of the cheese episode Uncle Josiah had taken the child to meeting regularly twice a week in hopes of turning her from her evil ways.

Without realizing it the boys down near the pond listened till the spiritual ended on a weird minor strain, then Rollie said in a low tone, "Say, John, I've got an idea. Let's go up to the hotel garden after dark and see if we can find any hollow in that sundial where the pearls may be hidden?"

"How'll we get in?" John wanted to know. "The wall's high with sharp barb-wire at the top."

"You said the lawn sloped to the water. We could go in Jim's boat."

"But Jim's gone fishing this week-end."

"Oh gee, I forgot that! Isn't there any way to get into the garden? Do they keep the gate locked?"

"Barred on the inside. I went back by there this afternoon after the gardener left and tried it. I noticed the iron bar that drops over a catch on the inside. There's no way to get it open unless you go through the hotel and of course we couldn't do that."

"Maybe we could climb the wall even if the wire is on top," continued Rollie, hating to give up his idea.

"Let's go down and see what the chances are before night," agreed John. "It would be crazy to buy that sundial if the pearls aren't inside."

"People have got on to the idea that we're huntin' the pearls anyhow. And I still believe that Hindu, Situ, heard Ann read the old letter. I've had a feelin' he's been watchin' us lately."

Ten minutes later the boys crossed the wide hotel lawn. They approached the garden by following the shadows of protecting shrubbery. The wall formed a continuation of the architectural scheme of the northern end of the building,

and was certainly too high to be safely scaled after dark. But on seeing the tall, narrow gate Rollie had an inspiration.

"We could make it through there!" he whispered to John.

"But I told you it's barred on the inside."

"Through that hole," said Rollie, pointing to a small, ornamental circle in the wooden gate, about six feet from the ground.

"Gee, a cat could hardly get through there!"

"Piggles isn't much bigger than a cat."

"I believe she could!" exclaimed John, his face lighting. "Then she can unbar the gate for us on the inside. If we can persuade her to do it. She's been scared to crook her finger since she stole that cheese."

"We'll have to explain how important it is," said Rollie.

With this plan in mind the boys returned home, and enticing the scrawny, serious-faced little Piggles to a secluded spot they explained her part on the evening program.

"Are you sure de debil won't git me?" she asked, rolling her eyes in terror of further wrongdoing.

"How could he?" exclaimed Rollie. "If those pearls are hidden in that sundial they belong to Ann, and we've got a right to have them. Nothing would make Uncle Josiah happier than for us to find 'em."

"Den Ah'll he'p you," stated the little girl, as though Rollie's last statement had settled the whole matter in her mind.

Luck seemed with them when darkness came. Ann had to go to choir practice, so Floss and Kit went over to the church with her. When Uncle Josiah was not attending night services in the little meeting house on the back bay he always went "to bed wif de chickens" as he expressed it. Piggles occupied a room adjoining his. When the boys whistled, she crept out to the back yard quietly and followed them down the shadowy section of Oakland Street, and through two back alleys to avoid the bright lights of Bay Street.

Even the stars had been kind enough to hide their brightness behind wind-rippled clouds. The tall stucco hotel reflected some of the light from the street on the other side, but the grounds were in total darkness where the boys entered.

John found comfort in touching the flashlight in his pocket. Rollie had a box of matches, two candles, and Ann's umbrella. This was to be the protection behind which to hold their light while examining the sundial.

At last they found the gate in the darkness. By this time the frightened Piggles was praying in a low tone, "Lawdy Gawd, forgib me if Ah doin' wrong! De white folks know right an' wrong better'n me. Dey tell me to open dis gate."

"Be quiet," ordered John. "God can hear you just the same if you pray under your breath—and nobody else can!"

Rollie kept his peace, for he had a miserable feeling that Piggles was thrusting her sins upon their shoulders. Maybe there was some other way they could examine the sundial without sneaking into the garden like this.

But when John made up his mind to do a thing he didn't hesitate. "Now, Rollie," he whispered, as they crowded close to the gate, "you help Piggles get on my shoulders, then I'll stand up. And Piggles, you'd better catch hold of the top of the gate and stick your feet

through that hole first. Then you can slide down and get a foot hold in the bar on the other side."

Though the night was hot Piggles' teeth were chattering like castanets. In spite of her nervousness they could not have selected a more expert climber for this task. Her bare toes had a firm grip. John stood up with her and she thrust her legs through the circle. The boys reached up on tiptoes, trying to prevent her falling. Piggles squirmed half-way through the circle, then suddenly a flood of light appeared from the near-by shrubbery.

A harsh voice out of the darkness beyond exclaimed, "So we've caught the hotel robbers red-handed!"

Someone else stirred behind the speaker. John had no feeling of guilt and quick as thought he took out his own flash. Its rays touched first the face of Mr. Stratford, then the cringing form of Situ. The next moment Piggles came tumbling to the lawn and the three of them faced the men wide-eyed, wondering what was going to happen next.

CHAPTER XVI

DECISIVE ACTION

WHEN John turned his flash full into the faces of Mr. Stratford and the leering Hindu he was overcome with terror. Though they had entered the hotel grounds with no intention of wrong-doing or harm to the property, how could they ever prove that to others?

"Caught right in the act of breaking in," said Mr. Stratford; his voice was low, but filled with condemnation and accusation.

"We weren't breaking in!" flared Rollie.

"The little negro would have been through the gate in another moment if I hadn't stopped you."

"But she was only going to unbar the gate on the inside and—and——" floundered Rollie.

"I see, and what did you want on the other side of the gate?"

"That's our business," snapped John quickly, fearing Rollie in his excitement might mention the sundial.

"I imagine the juvenile court can make you explain your business there," snapped Mr. Stratford. "Aren't these the same boys you've seen dodging about the alleys, Situ?" he asked, turning to his servant.

The Hindu mumbled assent, and though the boys could not see his face they knew it wore a leering smile.

John felt like an animal at bay. For some reason these men were trying to pin wrongdoing upon them. What was back of it all? How could they clear themselves now without mentioning the sundial?

"You haven't much to do—watching everywhere we go!" said Rollie daringly.

"I guess we've got as much right on these grounds at night as you have," added John, taking courage from Rollie's example.

Piggles had continued to crouch in the shrubbery ever since they had been detected, but now the boys realized that she was working her way, inch by inch, toward the street. This gave John an idea. He caught Rollie's arm and pulling him close whispered, "Let's beat it!"

For a moment neither of them dared move, yet

it was foolish to stay and submit to further questions which they could not answer. Suddenly the Hindu realized that Piggles was slipping off. He made a lunge at her in the bushes, but the little girl was too wiry and alert. Like a frightened rabbit she bounded forward, disappearing rapidly across the lawn. Immediately the boys darted off in another direction, thus dividing the pursuing forces.

On the west of the grounds John vaulted a low brick wall, and Rollie was close behind. From there they ran down a shadowy street where the rows of fine old houses were vacated during summer. But not until the boys were under the deep shadows of the trees on Oakland Street did they pause for breath. The rustling of some branches in an oak overhead was enough, however, to send them off again, and this time they did not stop until they were safely behind the door at home.

"I wonder if Piggles got back all right," panted John.

"She's sly enough to take care of herself," said Rollie. "What gets me is why those men were watchin' us?"

They sat down wearily on the stairs, waiting for, they knew not what. The tall clock in the hall chimed nine.

"I guess Ann and the others haven't come from choir practice yet," John said.

"Seems like we've been away hours," murmured Rollie. "Wish I knew what Mr. Stratford's game was."

"He's after those pearls and I can bet on it. If that Hindu servant of his heard Ann read Captain Bradley's letter then he probably knows we're looking for sundials hoping to find the pearls. But I wasn't going to stand up there to-night and admit it."

"Then I guess he didn't find the pearls in that old clock he bought. I never have felt comfortable about sellin' that clock."

"He had some reason for buying it—or he never would have handed out those bills so easily."

"Everybody's so hot after those pearls," murmured Rollie. "They must be valuable."

"I guess we'll never find 'em. Looks like we'll have to get out of this house Tuesday all on account of those old taxes."

"Seems like there ought to be somebody we could borrow from. But we haven't any real friends here except Judge Carter, and you know how everybody calls him the poverty-stricken aristocrat."

"The Raja might lend it to us if he would only come back in time."

"Imagine Ann asking to borrow money from a total stranger like that!" Rollie grunted.

"But he told Ann it was more important for him to have the pearls than it was for her," stated John. "Then he ought to be willing to do anything to keep strangers from getting into the house and finding them."

"And for some reason Mr. Stratford is after 'em too. Do you suppose he would pay more for them than Mr. Rajagopal?"

Rollie's last question fell on deaf ears, for this further mention of Mr. Stratford brought John a thought that made him hot and cold by turns.

"Say, Rollie!" he exclaimed, "we forgot and left Ann's umbrella by the garden gate at the hotel."

"Jimminy gee! We surely did," burst forth Rollie. "And it had her full name printed on

it." Suddenly the boy stopped short and began feeling frantically in all his pockets.

"What's the matter?" asked John.

"I left those candles and my match case—you know the one Ann gave me for scout camp with my name on it."

"Of all things!" exclaimed John in disgust.

"I just laid 'em on the lawn while I helped Piggles on your back. How did I know we'd be leavin' in such a hurry?"

"Maybe they won't notice the things and we can go back and get 'em at daylight," John said hopefully. "Let's go see if Piggles is home. Uncle Josiah would just pass out if anything happened to that little nigger."

Neither of the boys anticipated passing beyond the locked door, but duty drove them into the dark yard, and across the lawn. The slave quarters consisted of a row of single rooms, each with a door opening on the yard. The boys were still some distance from Piggles' abode when they heard a high, tense voice praying, "An' Ah won't neber try to broke in nobody's yard no more, dear Lawd—if'n you'll sabe me dis time. Sabe me, Lawd, sabe me f'um dat brown heathen!"

Without a word the boys moved back toward the house. They felt that listening longer would be intruding on a soul in real torture. Perhaps they had done the greatest wrong in carrying Piggles with them, when she was trying so hard to overcome her thievish tendencies.

"Let's keep mum about this," cautioned John. "Ann's got enough to worry her anyhow."

However, they were to realize the next morning that the affair was not to be so easily ended. Though they returned to the hotel grounds at the first peep of dawn, Ann's umbrella, the match case and candles were gone.

"That'll be evidence against us," stated Rollie.

Sunday was not a very happy day for anyone at the Bradley house, with that disastrous second Tuesday so close at hand. But there was church in the morning and evening to occupy their time and thoughts. The boys recalled with relief that Mr. Stratford had never been seen attending the little brick church, so they could go that far with a feeling of comparative safety. In the afternoon they refused to take the usual Sunday walk with the girls on the bay. They preferred the safety of home.

Monday morning dawned bright outside, but there were heavy hearts within. "Something drastic must be done before the day is over!" stated Ann at the breakfast table. "We are almost two hundred dollars short of what we need."

"Somehow I feel that I'm the one who has failed you," Kit moaned.

"Now, Kit, don't start that," said Ann; "why, you and Floss have been the most loyal pals a girl ever had. We would never have even gotten here but for you. We've all done the best we could!"

"You're right, Ann. The odds have just been against us," said Floss.

"It's just too awful to lose a place like this for the lack of a few dollars," moaned Ann. "But I will not do anything to worry my stepfather. Mother's last letter was anything but cheerful about him. Of course if we have to lose everything he need not know till he's better. If I ask for money he'll have to know all about it and that may fret him to death. And he hasn't the money anyhow, so what's the use?"

"Ann, I believe I'd try the banks again," sug-

gested Floss. "They can't do more than say no."

"If Mr. Rajagopal would only come back I'll bet he would help," said Kit. "If the pearls mean so much to him he surely doesn't want anyone else coming here and claiming them."

Ann finished her breakfast in silence. At last she slipped her napkin through the worn silver ring bearing her great-grandfather's name. She rose and stood a moment behind her chair then said slowly, "I'm going to take your advice, Floss. I'll ask Judge Carter to go to the bank with me, and we'll see what can be done."

In a few minutes they had scattered about their various duties. Even though this promised to be their last day in the old house, life went on in its usual routine. Ann hurried off to confer with Judge Carter. Floss, for the sake of the money she earned went to her desk in the office of the man she had come to distrust. John's first hour after breakfast was always given to work at the paint store, while Kit went out to the kitchen to plan dinner with Uncle Josiah and Piggles. Though Piggles was only twelve she had inherited her mother's instinct for

cooking and was fast becoming a most efficient little maid. Rollie was the only one who had no routine duties, and being troubled this morning with a most unpleasant conscience concerning Saturday night's escapade he voluntarily mowed the front lawn, hoping thereby to win favor. He had just reached the point of raking the clippings into the hollow near the pond when John came bounding across the yard.

"Say," he cried eagerly, "I'm really going to sell some of my plants."

"Who's gonner buy 'em?" grunted Rollie, wondering who would spend money on John's water plants.

"Old Andrews, the hotel gardener."

"Jimminy! Where'd you see him?"

"At the hotel. I took a chance on sneaking on the lawn again, thinking maybe I might still find the umbrella and match case."

"How'd you dare?" exclaimed Rollie, marveling at his brother's courage.

"Shucks! I don't believe Mr. Stratford has said one word about catching us there the other night. Anyhow Andrews was in a better humor than he's ever been, and said he'd buy the plants

if I'd bring 'em down and set 'em out in the pond."

" Then you can get a good look at the sundial after all." Rollie's eyes were shining with delight.

" Of course—that's what I'm so tickled over. You can come along with me, and watch till Andrews gets out of sight, then we can examine that dial and see if anything could be hidden in it."

Rollie dropped his rake and followed John to the pond where his plants, under the tenderest of care, had blossomed and spread with numberless shoots. John waded knee deep into the water, and began selecting bunches of plants.

" I'm going to pick out shoots even better than those advertised in the catalogues," he said, holding up a perfect specimen for Rollie's inspection. " Shoots no better than this sell three for fifty cents."

" You might just take the catalogue along and let Andrews see he's getting a real bargain," Rollie suggested.

The pile of fat-leafed plants on the lawn increased rapidly, and John said, " Rollie, will you

go up to the house and get me some heavy wrapping paper, or some bags to put these in. I'm busting to get back to the hotel with 'em!"

It seemed to John that Rollie scarcely had time to reach the house before he was fairly flying back across the lawn. His face was white and his eyes full of misery.

"John, oh John!" he gasped. "Mr. Stratford's up there talkin' to Kit!"

"Mr. Stratford—good gosh!"

"Do you reckon he's gonner have us arrested for breakin' into the hotel?"

"But we didn't break in—or bother anything." John dropped an armful of plants and came closer to his brother. "But why else would he be coming?"

So obsessed were the boys with dread of some terrible consequences of Saturday night's experience, that for a moment their thoughts were muddled. Finally Rollie said, his face brightening, "Oh, maybe he came to look at the antiques. You know he said he was comin' weeks ago when he bought the clock."

"Let's hope so. Was Ann in there with Kit too?"

"I don't think she's back from town yet."

Selling the plants had lost all allurement at this unexpected turn of events. Mechanically John dragged the cuttings back to the water to prevent them wilting, and sat down near by, waiting for, he knew not what. They were a gloomy pair; neither of them had anything to say. Presently the noon whistle at the fish factory on distant Bay Point pierced the summer stillness. Smoke rose, a straight column into the white-hot sky from the kitchen chimney. An occasional clatter of pots and pans drifted through the rear window.

At last the boys could endure the suspense no longer. Rising without a word they moved noiselessly to the shelter of the cape jasmine bush under the parlor window. Now they caught voices, but some distance away; perhaps in the hall. Surely Mr. Stratford was leaving. Footsteps were heard. Yes, Ann had returned. She was speaking louder and more emphatically than usual, "I appreciate your interest, Mr. Stratford—but I cannot accept your offer to buy the place. I have just made arrangements to sell. Papers are now being drawn up."

"Jimminy Christmas! Did you hear that?" groaned Rollie.

"Maybe it's just a stall to get rid of Stratford."

"Why, John, you know Ann wouldn't tell a story to get rid of him!" exclaimed Rollie surprised.

John warned his brother to silence. A heavy tread crossed the porch and descended the front steps. The boys ventured farther into the shrubbery and saw Mr. Stratford going down the walk. They waited until he left the grounds before hurrying to the porch. The girls were still in the hall.

"My, but he looked peeved!" Kit was saying. "But say, Ann, have you really made arrangements to sell?"

Suddenly Ann dropped to the stairs and began to cry. "I—I never hated to do anything so in my life, Kit, but it was the only sensible thing. To-morrow it would be taken from me anyhow without any return."

"Now don't cry, honey! You know that's really why we came," consoled Kit, sitting down and gathering Ann into her arms.

"I know, but we didn't realize what a dream of a place it was—and we didn't think there was anything to the Bradley pearl part of the legacy."

"Who's gonner buy it?" asked John gloomily.

"Somebody from the tourist ship. Judge Carter heard about him and arranged it all." Ann hunted frantically for a handkerchief and Kit supplied one from her own pocket. "It seems this man saw the house and wanted it last year, but poor Miss Hannah wouldn't sell—still clinging to hope of finding the pearls, I guess. The judge says we aren't getting the real value, but it's the best he can do."

"Maybe Mr. Stratford would have paid more. You didn't ask him to make an offer," said Kit.

"Not after he told me that Harrison was his agent and he'd come for my decision about the sale which I had promised to give on the second Monday in August."

"Did you tell him we knew there wasn't any Harrison and that he wrote the note?"

"I didn't bother," replied Ann wearily.

"Why, just the sneaking way he's gone about everything proves there's something rotten in it all," said Kit.

"I'd almost rather die than let it pass into that man's hands!" burst forth Ann. "Of course he has some sneaking, low motive for wanting to get his clutches on this property—and ——"

"The pearls of course," stated Rollie. "I'm beginning to believe he or Situ have watched everything we've done since we came to town."

"My, but he was furious when you told him you'd already made arrangements to sell and that the papers were being drawn up!" exclaimed Kit.

"Why, he was hardly civil as he left the house," said Ann. She wiped her eyes and sat a moment nervously twisting the handkerchief. "I almost wish it was all over and we were safely back home. I have a miserable feeling that something even more terrible is going to happen."

John and Rollie glanced at each other apprehensively. Would the thwarted Stratford now have them arrested?

CHAPTER XVII

ANN IS MISSING

A DOWNCAST group gathered around the lunch table that noon. Although Judge Carter said there would be no hurry about Ann leaving the house, it seemed that their stay in Oakdale was almost at an end.

"I would like to see Mr. Rajagopal once more before we go," said Ann.

"Suppose we find the pearls after the house is sold," said Rollie, "will they belong to us?"

"I guess we have enough hard problems without bothering with one we're not likely to have to solve," Floss told him.

"Ann hasn't signed the papers yet," said Kit, an unusual, quizzical expression on her face. "Until then the property's hers."

When Uncle Josiah learned that Ann was being forced to sell he was broken-hearted. "Oh, li'l Miss, don' do dat jus' when us startin' to lib in it like us uster."

"But there's nothing else I can do, Uncle

Josiah," said Ann sadly. "To-morrow it would go for taxes at noon and I would get nothing out of it."

"But how 'bout dem pearls whut de Cap'n wrote to de ole Miss 'bout? We got to find 'em, li'l Miss."

"But if we can't, we can't," said Ann almost impatiently.

"Wal, I'se gwine down to Brudder Simmons whut preach to us at meetin' house an' ax he to pray de Lawd to sabe us house. He hab great influence wid de Lawd. Whut he ax he mos' in ginnerally gits."

"It would really be a miracle if we could save the place now," said Ann with little hope in her voice. "But, Uncle Josiah, there's one thing more I want before we have to leave."

"If'n it's anyt'ing dis ole nigger kin do jes' say de wud, li'l Miss."

"Crab gumbo, Uncle Josiah. I want some more crab gumbo like you made last week."

"But who's got time to go crabbing this afternoon, Ann?" asked John. "We promised to carry some water plants down to the hotel garden."

"I wasn't asking you to do it," his sister replied. "Maybe Kit and I will go along with Uncle Josiah."

"I'm—I'm sorry, Ann, but I had other plans," faltered Kit, and everyone wondered why she flushed and seemed so confused. Then she hastened to add, "John, I'll take you by the hotel in the flivver. You'll get the plants all crushed carrying them in your arms."

"Gee, that's good of you, Kit!"

"Well, I think I'll go with Uncle Josiah anyhow," said Ann. "I've got to do something to get my mind off this house business."

Uncle Josiah was clearing the table as they talked, and now he asked, "Whut time, li'l Miss? Ah'd like a few minutes fer de comfurence wid Brudder Simmons 'fore we go."

"Oh, not until later. The sun's too hot now," replied Ann.

As Floss put on her hat to return to work she announced calmly, "This is my last afternoon there. I don't think I could stand it another day even if our plans hadn't fallen through. I'm quite sure now that I was only hired so that Mr. Stratford could keep tab on our doings."

"There's certainly something queer about him and no getting around it," admitted Ann. "Why he should want to buy this house when he's only been taking pictures and making plans of the other old houses in the community is more than I can see. And if he wanted to buy it why didn't he come out frankly and say so when we first came?"

"Maybe he had to wait for authority," said Floss. "Remember that cable, 'Stop at nothing to prevent the return of prince. Purchase is authorized.' I'll never forget those words."

"But Floss, darlin', how could that have anything to do with us—and this house? There's no prince here."

Floss pulled her hat down at an unusually rakish angle. Turning as she reached the door she hurled back at them an explosive bomb. "Had you ever thought that Mr. Rajagopal might be an Indian prince?"

"Why did she ever think of that?" burst forth Kit when Floss was gone.

"I'm sure I don't know," said Ann wearily. "We seem all mixed up with international complications, sheriff sales and missing pearls."

"It's those pearls that are at the root of the whole trouble," stated Rollie. "Oh, if we could only find 'em!"

"And I firmly believe that's why Mr. Stratford was so furious when you told him you were going to sell the property to someone else," said Kit. "He's determined to have those pearls!"

"And Mr. Rajagopal's determined to have them at any price," added Ann.

"And we've all been determined to find them —but nobody has!" said John impatiently. "Come along, Rollie, and help me with those plants. There's money in them, but none in just talking about old lost pearls."

The tide was very low when the boys returned to the pond. John noticed that drifting leaves and twigs had clogged the wire screening which prevented his fish escaping through the canal that connected the pond with the inlet. "I'll have to clean this away first," he said wading into the muck.

Each side of this entrance was strengthened with slabs of coquina rock and stone which the boys had found half-buried in muck. As John raked away the trash, Rollie, who stood watch-

ing said wonderingly, " I never noticed how that stone at the right was carved, did you? "

John glanced casually at the slab his brother indicated and said, " That's queer—it was all caked with mud when I put it there, but I guess the tide washing in and out of the pond has cleaned it off. It looks like a headstone to me. I'll bet Judge Carter was wrong—and some people were buried in this hollow."

" Who ever heard of a tombstone having such a hideous carvin' on it as that is," grunted Rollie.

At that moment there came the sputter of the flivver being coaxed into action and John scrambled up to the bank. " We'll have to hurry if we're going down-town with Kit."

John wasted no time in making his sales to the hotel gardener. As he was working outside the wall the boys saw no chance of inspecting the sundial so they hurried on to the paint store. Later in the afternoon they passed through the negro section of town to deliver some paint on back bay. They were just about to turn a corner when suddenly the quick-eyed John caught Rollie's arm. They were surprised to see Mr. Stratford a short distance down the street talk-

ing to Piggles. He was towering above her, his manner threatening, aggressive. But for once Piggles was standing her ground like a little game cock. John and Rollie sneaked nearer to the shelter of a broad-trunked oak.

Suddenly the Englishman moved closer to the little negro. With a toss of her head Piggles exclaimed, "Look here, Mister, you can't tech me! Ah lib to de white folks' house!"

With that she took to her heels and disappeared through a doorway across the street.

"That must be Brother Simmons' house," whispered Rollie. "I wonder if Mr. Stratford was tryin' to scare her about the other night."

"I don't know, but we'd better beat it before he sees us," warned John.

The boys did not return to the house till late afternoon. The place seemed as deserted as a graveyard until they reached the back porch where they found Piggles sitting on the steps.

"Where's everybody?" John wanted to know.

"Ah don't know," grunted Piggles sullenly. "Miss Kit she drib up while ago an' telled me not to go 'way till somebody else comed. She say she had to go back down-town."

"Where're Ann and Uncle Josiah?"

"Ah reckon dey went crabbin'. Nets're gone," replied Piggles with a motion toward the oak where the nets generally leaned.

The boys strolled up to the knoll from which the entire northeastern marsh could be viewed, but there was not a boat in sight.

"Maybe they're crabbin' round some of the docks," said Rollie.

Aimlessly they strolled back to where Piggles sat, her bare toes planted firmly on the steps, elbows on her knees and chin cupped in her palm.

"What was Mr. Stratford talking to you about this afternoon?" John asked curiously.

At this question Piggles' eyes stretched their widest. "How come you know dat?" she questioned.

"We were just around the corner and saw you."

"And we heard you say he couldn't touch you because you live in white people's house," added Rollie.

At this Piggles grinned. "You sho' hear right! Dat man ain't skeer me much. Ah know Mis' Ann had de imfluence wid Jedge Carter,

an' dey take keer dey niggers. Ain't dat nigger Nick git in trouble all time—and de Jedge allus git him out?"

"But why did he try to scare you?" asked John. "Why was he talkin' to you?"

"He try to make believe he t'ink us stealin' up to de hotel de oder night. Ah tell him Ah swear 'fore Gawd us ain't meant to take nothin' away. Us jus' want to look at dat ole sundial."

"Jimminy Christmas, Piggles! Didn't you have any better sense than that?" moaned Rollie. "Hasn't Uncle Josiah told you over and over that nobody outside this house must know we were lookin' for the pearls?"

"Ah ain't say nothin' 'bout no pearls!" stated Piggles. "Ah ain't mention pearls to dat man!"

"Why, any dunce would know from what you said that we were going to look for the pearls in the sundial!" moaned John.

"He keep on axin' me, an' sayin' de cops would git me fer breakin' in de hotel if'n Ah didn't answer," whined Piggles. "Brudder Simmons says tellin' lies is bad as stealin' so Ah jus' don' answer dat white man nuttin' till he scared me so wid de cops. Den Ah tell him

don' nobody know whut sundial dem pearls hid in 'cept Grampah."

"You crazy nigger!" cried John.

"Now you've spoiled everything!" Rollie's face was red with anger. "If you weren't so little—and a girl I'd bust you right over that thick head of yours!"

But Piggles wasn't taking any chances. She rose and backed toward the kitchen. "Ah want Grampah to come home." She began to cry. "Eberybody pickin' on me to-day!"

"You ought to be picked to pieces with a whip!" sneered John.

"Spillin' the beans to the very person we wanted to keep out of our affairs," added Rollie scathingly.

Piggles waited for no more, but barricaded herself behind the kitchen door.

It was after sunset before Kit returned and to the boys' amazement there were traces of tears in her eyes.

"What's the matter?" John wanted to know.

"I may as well own up," said Kit. "I wired home, hoping Dad would lend Ann that extra money."

"Gee, that was good of you, Kit," said John. "But isn't it too late now—with the papers already being drawn up for the sale?"

"It won't be too late till twelve o'clock tomorrow—the hour scheduled for the sale," said Kit stubbornly. "You see the place isn't sold till Ann signs that paper, and people always have the right to change their minds about a sale. But I guess it will have to go through," she ended. "I couldn't get in touch with Dad."

"Why?" asked Rollie.

"He and Mother had just started for southern California. They're driving through and there's no way of reaching them for three or four days—and then it'll be too late."

"I reckon there's no hope," stated John. "Everything's against us." Then he told Kit of Piggles' disclosure to Mr. Stratford.

"Doesn't that beat the Dutch!" burst forth Kit.

When Floss came in from work and still Ann had not returned they began to be truly alarmed. They felt that something unusual must have happened to keep her out so late.

"I came in about four-thirty after I sent my

wire," Kit told them, " and saw the boat moving toward the shell point over there where the old oyster factory used to be."

" If we had another boat beside Jim Dawkins' we could go look for her," said Rollie.

" I wish I'd come home sooner," said Floss miserably. " I've had almost nothing to do today. Mr. Stratford's been gone most of the afternoon. And I think Situ must have had the afternoon off. I saw another Hindu with him this morning."

" Maybe they're all down at the hotel lookin' in that sundial for the pearls," said Rollie bitterly. Then he told Floss also of Piggles' disclosure.

" I'm not going to stand here talking till it gets black dark!" exclaimed John. " I'm going to hunt for Ann. Nick has an old piece of a bateau down at the judge's office, I'll borrow it. Maybe Ann and Uncle Josiah struck a snag or something over by the reefs and can't get home. That's a grand place for crabs, but not very safe for boats."

CHAPTER XVIII

CAPTURED

NEAR the bluff in the cool shadows of the old oyster cannery, Uncle Josiah held the boat to a steady position while Ann searched the clear water for crabs that occasionally came to nibble at the four lines of bait hanging over the side. Ann had felt a little like a runaway as they left the house, but she was too restless to stay indoors; she must do something to forget her misery at giving up the old house she so loved.

Again and again her scoop plunged into the water to bring up a squirming crab, and the crocus sack in the bottom of the boat was soon half filled. She actually forgot her heavy heart enough to feel elated over her success.

"That's quite enough for a big pot of gumbo, isn't it?" She held the bag wide so that the old negro could see the contents.

"More'n er plenty, li'l Miss."

"Then we'd better be going home. It takes a

long time to pick out the meat. It's nearly sundown now."

They were close under the shell bluff when Ann drew in the lines, and Uncle Josiah economically rolled the remainder of the bait in some stiff paper. The old man was engaged in this task while Ann tied the cord securely around the neck of the crocus sack.

Gradually she became aware that someone was quite close, though she had heard no sound. She had a strange sensation that eyes were peering at her intently. How silly to let her nerves get the best of her like that! An almost overpowering desire to glance up possessed her as she tied the knot in the sack.

Then suddenly Uncle Josiah's alarmed cry, "Lawdy he'p us!" brought her to a realization that real danger lurked near.

She dropped the sack and looked up squarely at the end of a pistol.

"Hands up!" ordered Situ's low voice. And the girl knew the orders of the leering Hindu were not to be disregarded.

Ann's arms instinctively went up, and she saw that Uncle Josiah had already obeyed. As her

gaze was held fascinated by her captor she saw another Hindu descending the steep shell bluff to the water. Ann wondered frantically what their motive could be. This second Hindu stood guard as Situ himself came down from the bluff. The thought of Uncle Josiah's loyalty was some comfort; she knew the old man would give his very life to protect her.

Situ ordered Uncle Josiah to take the oars and row northward. Seating himself in front of the old man he held his gun ready for action.

"You watch girl," Situ said to his companion.

Dazed and terrified, Ann could not guess the cause of this most unexpected proceeding. "What's the meaning of this?" she suddenly burst forth, turning and facing Situ. "You are Mr. Stratford's servant! How dare you threaten our lives like this! What do you want with us?"

"Mr. Stratford will make plain the reason for the enforced capture."

"Mr. Stratford! Do you mean to say that he knows you are taking us into the marsh?"

"He awaits you there," replied Situ in his stilted English.

Miserably Ann realized that Uncle Josiah was

rowing steadily north into a vast, uninhabited region of marsh. Why was Stratford waiting for her there? No longer now could she doubt that some evil motive had been back of his every contact with them. She thought of his recent visit and his indignation at not being able to buy the house. But speculation was worse than useless, she finally decided. She could no more understand Stratford's low motives than she could unravel the mystery of the Bradley pearls.

The sun sank into a sea of marsh. Oakdale became merely a smoky smudge on the horizon. Uncle Josiah, too terrified to pause for breath, rowed steadily down winding inlets till his black face shone with moisture.

"To Shady Cove," ordered Situ. "Do you know the way?"

"Yassir! But—but you ain't gwine take de li'l Miss dere, is you?" moaned Uncle Josiah.

"Don't start argument with me, old man. Obey the orders," retorted Situ.

"But dat place am ha'nted," moaned Uncle Josiah. "Dat ain't no place fer a Bradley to be took."

Ann now recalled the description of the cove

which the boys had given after going there for plants. Sudden horror and fear gripped her so that she shivered in spite of the sultry heat.

Then from behind her she heard Situ's companion saying something in a foreign language. Situ's face instantly showed alarm.

"Quick, into the marsh, old man! A boat passing!" he ordered in a low, commanding tone.

But Uncle Josiah's slow thoughts and stiff muscles did not react quickly enough. Situ snatched an oar, and a moment later the boat was hidden by tall marsh grass that bordered the inlet. Ann could now hear oars some distance away. No sooner did she realize that this was her opportunity to call for help than the Hindu behind her placed the muzzle of his pistol between her shoulder blades.

"Not one sound!" hissed Situ.

Perhaps fifteen minutes they waited there while the sound of dipping oars faded into the still twilight.

"Now row and row fast," ordered Situ when at last he pushed the boat from the protecting marsh.

Twilight instantly faded to night shadows

under the towering trees that bordered the lagoon. They landed on the swampy island. Tangled underbrush and vines made walking difficult as the Hindus drove the prisoners before them up the slope. Then a light appeared a short distance away, as though someone had opened a door.

"Straight to the light," ordered Situ behind them.

"Let me go 'head, li'l Miss," said Uncle Josiah solicitously. "Dis islun's full o' snakes."

But Ann scarcely had patience to adjust her pace to the old man's slow tread. She was nervously anxious to reach the cabin and learn from Stratford the cause of this strange proceeding. At least she preferred trusting herself to the mercy of a white man than to these low-caste foreigners.

The Englishman was standing near the hearth in the shack as Situ urged Ann through the door with the muzzle of his pistol. He was nervously rubbing his hands together as the girl crossed the threshold.

"I'm sorry our conference must be in this lonely place, Miss Bradley," Stratford began,

" but you forced it on me by your refusal to sell this morning."

" What do you mean? " burst forth Ann. " Why should my refusal to sell cause these dirty heathens to bring us here? "

" It has everything to do with it," retorted Stratford, a cynical smile on his thin, cruel lips. His mask of the polished gentleman now entirely fell away, and the girl saw him as he was, hard, crafty and willing to resort to any measures to carry out his iron will. " I must own the Bradley estate. To me it means—everything! "

At this confession Ann could only stammer an inarticulate, " Why? "

Before replying Stratford placed a chair for the girl, and took another close by, while the exhausted old negro crouched in a miserable heap on a low bench on the hearth. The two Hindus stood guard on each side of the fireplace.

" I do not have to explain to you my reasons," retorted Stratford with a hard, triumphant smile. " When you have signed the papers and received the money I shall pay you for the place, then you will have nothing more to worry over."

" What nerve! " retorted Ann with more dar-

ing than she knew she possessed. "And if I refuse?"

"You won't refuse when you hear all I have to say." Stratford ended this statement with a short, harsh laugh.

What did he mean? Suddenly a sickening sensation swept over Ann making her hot and cold in turn. She felt dizzy and for a moment feared she was going to faint. With a mighty effort she brought her nerves under control, forcing herself to calmness.

"You don't seem to realize that you could be sent to prison for kidnapping," she told him daringly.

"But you won't tell what happened," stated Stratford.

Ann stared at him wide-eyed. What had given him such assurance?

Stratford now rose and pushed a dirty pine-board table close to Ann. He picked up and unfolded a blue-bound legal-looking paper. "I have the deeds all drawn up for the sale. All you have to do is to sign here."

"But I will not!" asserted Ann, suddenly drawing herself very erect, and gripping her

hands in her lap as though she feared he might use physical force to secure her signature.

Stratford slapped the paper back on the table. "I fawncy you'll come to terms when you hear all I have to say," he stated in a level, hard voice, "if you do not sign, at dawn to-morrow morning your brothers and the old negro's granddaughter will be arrested for burglarizing the hotel."

"Why—why, you're crazy!" exploded Ann. "My brothers have never broken into the hotel."

Stratford didn't bat an eye as he continued, "Several hundred dollars in small objects about the building and grounds have been pilfered during the summer—such work as small boys would do. Your brothers would have a hard time proving their innocence when I caught them red-handed the other night. And luckily they dropped this match case and left an umbrella which anyone could verify as yours." Stratford extended toward Ann the nickel match case bearing Rollie's name, which she had given to him for his camping trips. "And the little negro girl left a portion of her dress in the lattice-work of

the gate when we caught her trying to climb through."

At sight of the scrap of red gingham Uncle Josiah moaned, "Lawdy, he'p us!"

"I don't believe one word of it," flared Ann. "Somehow you've gotten hold of these things and are trying to scare me into signing away the property."

"Your belief or disbelief can't save them from arrest," snapped Stratford, becoming impatient at the girl's stubbornness. "Perhaps it will not be so good for your father's weak heart, when he receives news—at once—of his sons' arrest!"

At these words Ann felt impotent, helpless. She saw at once the calibre of the man with whom she was dealing. He had carefully laid a trap from which there was no escape. A surge of indignation swept over her making her forget fear for a moment.

Her eyes were flashing angrily as she leaned toward him. "I—I wanted to hurry and get here because I thought a white man would be more decent than those low creatures! But you're lower than the lowest animal if you use my sick stepfather to terrify me."

She paused for sheer lack of breath, but when Stratford tried to get in a word she hastened on. "And we aren't so dumb as you think—we aren't a bunch of dunces even if we are all under age. We realize that you only hired Floss so you could keep tab on us. She saw that cable message you got from India. You and your low servants," she went on with a contemptuous wave of her hand toward the Hindus by the hearth, "are acting as agents for somebody in India. What your motive or purpose is—I don't know—but we're certain you're not after that house, but the Bradley pearls—and you'll never get them from me!"

Stratford had evidently not expected this frank outburst from the sweet-voiced girl who had made the village rejoice with her singing. He and Situ exchanged significant glances.

"So you have found them!" he finally said, a triumphant glint coming into his eyes. "That makes the whole way smoother for us all."

Ann glanced toward Uncle Josiah, but the old man, believing his li'l Miss could handle the situation, had no notion of betraying the truth.

"Yes, I much prefer buying the pearls them-

selves than being bothered with the whole house. On the night of your arrival I sent you that note offering to buy them."

"You can't buy anything just by forcing my signature," Ann retorted as a happy thought came to her. "If you read the will in the paper as carefully as you've watched everything else, you'll know that Judge Carter is joint executor. Nothing can be sold without his consent."

At this Stratford laughed in spite of himself. "I congratulate you on having a rather keen mind, little lady. But I fawncy Judge Carter will raise no objections to your selling me the pearls when you insist on so doing."

"But I shall do nothing of the sort!"

"That's just with you! Take your choice! Unless the pearls are passed into my hands by to-morrow morning then your brothers and the little negro go to jail—and—and your father will be notified at once!"

A groan escaped the old man on the bench. "My Angelina ain't been stealin', li'l Miss! Ain't she done find de Lawd an' beg forgibness fer sich sins?"

"It's only a trap, Uncle Josiah! Don't let

him frighten you!" consoled Ann with more courage than she felt.

This speech was like touching a match to the tinder of Stratford's temper. His sun-burned face grew copper-colored and he came a step nearer, menacingly. "Look here, young lady—you think yourself rawther clevah! You'll find you're involved in no childish affair before this night's over! I came to Oakdale to prevent Prince Rajagopal securing those pearls and you'll never leave this shack until they're in my possession!"

"Then you didn't find the pearls in the old clock!" Ann exclaimed almost before realizing what she was saying.

"The old clock——" Stratford paused a half second with a puzzled manner. Then he went on, "Oh, you mean the little antique I bought from the boys? Oh no, the pearls weren't there, but the little hand-painted scene of the Rajagopal castle in India told me that I was on the right track—that the glass had been painted by the exiled prince. Situ recognized the scene at once when I took it home. Naturally I didn't find the pearls in the old clock when Captain Bradley put

them in the sundial. Don't fawncy you can put anything over on me, young lady! You've got to come across with those pearls!"

"But I haven't found the pearls!" Terrible fear of this desperate man now gripped Ann. "Surely you wouldn't keep me here when I've never even seen the pearls!"

"But I thought you said——"

"I didn't say I'd found them!"

"Well, the old man knows where they are!" exclaimed Stratford, wheeling on Josiah. "Your little girl told me this very afternoon that nobody knew what sundial they were in except her grandfather."

"You—you scum!" burst forth Ann, swept again from caution by her indignation. "To—to terrify a helpless little girl into telling you that! And we know now that Situ was eavesdropping the night I read my great-grandfather's letter."

"We haven't been asleep!" Stratford laughed sarcastically, thus admitting the truth. A moment later he added, turning back to Josiah, "Out with it, old man! I want a description of

that sundial! We'll comb the earth till we find it and those pearls!"

"Dem pearls belongs to de li'l Miss," whined Uncle Josiah.

Suddenly Stratford realized that argument was useless. He stood gazing thoughtfully at the sputtering candle on the table near which Ann sat. Finally he sat down with apparent calmness and faced her. Something of his former suavity had returned.

"Miss Bradley, the issue now revolves itself to the first point I made. You must sell me the house! My ownership of the property will certainly prevent Rajagopal ever getting his clutches on the pearls."

"But I told you I would not!" cried Ann, now on the verge of tears.

"Then by your own selfishness you force me to send up your brothers to jail. Have you stopped to think how such a shock may affect your father?"

Baffled, helpless, indignant Ann suddenly forgot herself. She sprang to her feet crying, "You're a fiend! I'll die before I'll give in!"

"And let your father die, too!" As Ann's heat rose Stratford appeared more calm.

"You can't force me to it!" Ann's voice was almost a scream now. Then suddenly, scarcely knowing what she was doing, she made a dash toward the door.

But Stratford caught her arm just as her hand touched the latch. "There's no need of trying that! You couldn't go very far before we overtook you. And screams are wasted energy. We're miles away from any human being."

At Ann's unexpected break for liberty Josiah, too, had risen, only to be forced back to his bench by the Hindus. Stratford now pushed Ann, none too gently, into a chair.

Turning to the Hindus he said, with suppressed rage in his tone, "She'll come to terms with a few hours' quiet thinking. I will leave her with you a while. I must go back to attend to some urgent matters."

"What if she try to break away?" asked Situ, evidently not relishing the idea of the task ahead of him.

"We bind them," suggested the other man, whom Stratford had once addressed as Chantu.

"If you'd rawther," agreed Stratford. "It won't hurt to play safe with a little spitfire like this."

Chantu picked up some coils of rope from a shadowy corner of the shack. At sight of the rope Uncle Josiah started up again, growling like an infuriated animal.

"Down there, old black man!" snapped Situ, quickly whipping his gun into position.

Actually shaking in his impotence Uncle Josiah sank back under fear of the leveled pistol. Ann was too breathless with fury to speak while Stratford took the rope from his servant. The coils were over her right hand before she would let herself believe that this man was actually going to bind her. Then suddenly with the superhuman strength of indignation she threw him off and darted backward only to feel Chantu's pistol thrust against her side.

"Surely—surely no gentleman would do a thing like this!" she almost screamed.

"You force me to ungentlemanly acts," said Stratford with bitter sarcasm. "There's no use resisting my plans any more than fighting against this rope. Perhaps a few hours of quiet im-

prisonment here will bring you to reason. In the meantime Chantu and Situ will stand guard."

When Ann and Uncle Josiah were both securely bound and propped up in chairs, Stratford turned to Situ. "Watch most carefully while I hurry over to Oakdale. I must have a water-tight alibi, you know. As soon as that girl comes to her senses here's pen and the document—unbind one hand and let her sign the deed."

A moment later he was gone, and in the dim candle-light Ann sat facing her two hideous guards. Uncle Josiah now seemed unmindful of anything passing around him and the girl knew by the mumbling movement of his lips that he was praying.

CHAPTER XIX

RESCUED

An hour passed like a nightmare in the sultry heat of the cabin in the swamp. Insects darted about the sputtering candle, while mosquitoes buzzed around Ann. In a short time her face and hands were puffed and red. Oh, for one breath of cool fresh air! The room reeked with a nauseating odor for the two Hindus smoked incessantly some vile-smelling stuff in their long pipes.

Like pieces of a puzzle, Ann tried to place in order the strange events that had occurred since their arrival in Oakdale. She now realized that the Bradley pearls had caused all these strange complications. But why should a simple woman's ornament, given in appreciation for hospitality, involve her, four generations later, in international complications?

Ann shifted her position wearily. How her bound hands and feet ached! If she could only

get one breath of clear, cool air perhaps she might think better.

"Would you please open a window?" she asked at last, turning to Situ. "This heat is awful!"

Situ said something to Chantu in dialect, shaking his head and pointing to the candle. They argued a moment, but finally Situ rose and extinguished the candle. In the smothering darkness Ann feared she might faint. But the next moment she heard the soft oriental slippers crossing the room, then the creaking of the one window as it was swung open. Never had the damp, cool air from the marshes been so welcome. It swept away some of the reeking smoke and cleared the girl's mind.

Was she insane to refuse Stratford's demands? Why had she clung so stubbornly to the hope of finding the pearls and selling them to Rajagopal? The thought of the refined, spiritual face of the princely young Hindu somehow gave her courage now. And it seemed that he really was a prince for Stratford had called him Prince Rajagopal.

Minutes dragged into hours. Grayness of reflected starshine brightened the rectangle of the

window, making it possible to see Uncle Josiah's bent form near the hearth. Occasionally a groan escaped the tortured old soul as he waited for his prayers to be answered. The glowing bowls of two pipes indicated where the Hindus sat on guard. Suddenly Ann's weary body stiffened. Was that someone moving through the underbrush? But her more concentrated listening only caught sounds of a million insects in the jungle growth of the island. Whom could she expect except Stratford, and his arrival would only force upon her some immediate decision?

While Ann focused her faculties to catch any unusual sound she realized that Chantu, sitting cross-legged near Uncle Josiah, was breathing with the regularity of one who slept. Then she saw that the ashes of his pipe no longer glowed. Instantly she became alert and turned toward Situ, but there was no relaxing of his vigil. His pipe bowl still glowed in the darkness. Even while she watched he packed in more weed. As it flared slightly, a glint of light was reflected from the metal of the pistol lying on the table in front of him. If she could only get her hand on

that gun she might wound the two guards so that she and Uncle Josiah could escape.

Slowly a daring plan took shape in her mind. She must act and act quickly before Stratford returned. There was a faint hope that she might outwit the two Hindus, but with a third man added there was no chance of carrying out such a plan.

"If you'll make a light I'll write on the paper," she said in a small, shaking voice.

"Hey, whut's dat, li'l Miss?" quavered Uncle Josiah. "Don't let 'um scare you into sellin' us place. De Lawd gwine answer mah prayer—if he hab to send he angel Gabriel to strik' dese men dade. Didn' he sabe Dan'l fum de lion's den an' de fiery funnace?"

"But these aren't the days of miracles, Uncle Josiah, and we can't have the boys and Piggles sent to jail. Only think what that might do to my stepfather!"

"But you know dey ain't bruk in no hotel. Dat white man tellin' a lie!" growled Uncle Josiah.

"Stop the talk," snarled Situ. Then bending

over the table he puffed his pipe to a deep red glow and touched it to the candle wick.

Ann's heart sank as he pushed the pistol away with his right hand and the paper toward her with his left. She scarcely glanced at the typewritten sheet. This was only a ruse to free her right hand; her reply to Uncle Josiah had only been to deceive her captors. Situ placed the pen and bottle of ink close to the document. Ann sat watching these proceedings intently, her thoughts busy with the method of escape she had planned. Once free and back in Oakdale, surely Judge Carter could help her devise some way out of this tangle.

When these preparations were complete she sat waiting. Situ lifted her arms to the table, and clipped the rope only where it confined her right fingers. Ann remained stubbornly passive.

" I can't write unless you free my whole hand," she stated.

The Hindu's long-nailed, filthy fingers slipped the rope down to her wrist. Ann moved her hand thoughtfully. Yes, she might handle a pistol with that much latitude. But the weapon was

still on the other side of the Hindu. She played for time.

"Bring the candle closer," she ordered. "I can't see the writing."

But Situ was alert, and Chantu had risen and drawn near. The two stood facing her, waiting. Ann sat with her back to the window. She noted the box of matches near the candle. Situ had returned his knife to his pocket, but she might burn apart the ropes that bound her feet—if she had a chance. And that only chance—one in a thousand—lay in extinguishing the candle and seizing the pistol before they were upon her.

Ann lifted her gaze to her captors to watch her opportunity to make a quick motion toward the candle. Suddenly she caught her breath in surprise! The Hindus were not looking at her at all but staring like two hypnotized creatures toward the open window. Chantu began to shake as with a chill. His jaw dropped like a dead man's. Situ's face was drawn into hideous lines by abject fear. Ann's blood froze within her. What terror had so transformed her hardened captors?

From the hearth Uncle Josiah moaned, "Oh,

Lawd a-mussy, Lawd a-mussy! Dese heathen hab brought de debil on us!"

Suddenly the Hindus' knees collapsed under them. They fell, prostrating themselves on the floor with arms extended far in front like Moslems worshiping at sundown. Ann turned toward the window, her gaze drawn there as though by a lodestone. Had she been less terrified at the sight that greeted her she would have screamed, but now sound died in her parched throat. The lower half of the window was filled with the most hideous, glowing red face she had ever seen. Surely some unfamiliar monster from this jungle island had come to devour them.

She was still sitting as though frozen to the spot, unable to move her gaze from the apparition, when the door at her right burst open. At the sound of running feet Chantu and Situ, certain that the evil spirit was coming to seize them, crouched lower on the floor, mumbling unintelligible prayers.

Ann, not knowing what to expect, turned toward the door. A cry of relief escaped her. John and Rollie were dashing into the room. Then everything happened with kaleidoscopic

swiftness. Each boy carried a sharp knife already open. John snatched the pistol from the table and placed it in Ann's free hand.

"Cover them while we cut the ropes," he ordered.

Ann obeyed mechanically, too dazed by this sudden turn of events to think or reason. In another moment her bindings were ripped off. Then instantly she was forced to alertness, for the Hindus, on not being instantly devoured by some approaching demon, had ventured to look up. John was on the floor trying to untangle the rope from her feet and Rollie was cutting Uncle Josiah free when the Hindus, realizing what was occurring, attempted to rise.

"Down," ordered Ann, and let the barrel of the pistol flash in the candlelight.

The hand that held the gun was too shaky, however, to terrify those calloused criminals. They made a leap toward the girl, but John averted disaster by pouncing upon Situ's back, checking him for a moment. But the boy was no match for the wiry Oriental, and the tables would have been turned in another moment had not Rollie and Uncle Josiah rushed to his aid.

The pistol Ann held was useless in the mix-up that followed. Noticing a long bit of rope that had been left from their bindings she snatched it up and rushed to John's aid. Uncle Josiah had planted his burly form on the frail Chantu. In spite of his age the muscles of his long arms still had gorilla-like strength, and he was able to overpower Chantu while the other three bound Situ. Then there were only scraps of rope with which to tie up Chantu, but they were strong enough to hold, at least until they could escape from the island.

Leaving the two men on opposite sides of the shack they rushed for the water. In passing the window John cried, " Wait, I mustn't forget the flash! We may need it to find the boats."

Ann was behind him and was forced to pause as he reached toward the window where the flashlight was propped on the window ledge. Suddenly she caught a hint of the ruse by which her brothers had rescued her.

" May as well bring along the slab," said Rollie. " We'll save it as a souvenir."

Ann didn't understand just how it had been worked, but she knew they must not court dis-

aster by useless delay and cried, "Hurry, do hurry, Uncle Josiah is half-way to the lagoon."

The boys had left Nick's old bateau in the rushes not far from where the Hindus had tied Jim Dawkins' boat. Rollie went for the bateau while the others tumbled into the rowboat. John pushed near and threw his brother a tow. When the bateau was made fast to the stern Rollie sprang for the rowboat and they pulled for the open inlet as fast as possible.

Not until they were really safe from pursuit did Ann realize that John had jabbed her leg with his sharp knife when cutting her bonds. The wound was now bleeding badly.

"Where's the flash?" she asked. "I'll have to tie up this cut."

"Gee, Ann, I'm sorry," said John sympathetically, on seeing the long gash he had made near her ankle, "but I couldn't half see and there wasn't a minute to waste."

"Oh, that's all right," Ann laughed to keep from showing her pain. "I'd rather have this than those ropes around my ankle."

With Rollie's knife she ripped off part of her dress sleeve and staunched the blood. The boys

pulled steadily through the lagoon, and at last they emerged into open water. When Ann saw the canopy of stars overhead she drew a deep breath of relief. Gradually the tense nerves relaxed and she began to wonder how the boys had so terrified the Hindus, and how they had been found.

"But how in the world did you all ever find us?" she asked.

"When you didn't come home we went down to Judge Carter's office and borrowed Nick's old bateau. He told us about seeing a boat going into the north marshes late this afternoon."

"And he had noticed those Hindus over toward the old oyster factory when he was taking the judge to Rose Island on business," added Rollie. "When we heard that we got scared sure enough—and thought right away about that old shack back at Shady Cove. We put two and two together and figured that we hadn't ever seen any boats going in this direction, and we thought there must be dirty work."

Rollie paused in his story to look behind him and get his bearings. Though there was no moon the starshine was bright enough to prevent their

running into the marshy patches that bordered the inlet.

John took up the account. "We borrowed Nick's boat, thinking we could overtake that boat he had seen. But it was a long way round from the bay. We stopped at the oyster factory and found tracks of the Hindus' narrow shoes in the white shell dust. So, by the time we reached the cove, it was black dark."

"Gosh, but it was spooky going up that swampy path to the shack!" shivered Rollie. "When we got close enough we saw light through the chinks and heard voices inside."

"Why, that was hours ago when the window was closed!" Ann exclaimed in amazement. "Why did you wait so long?"

"Gee, it took time to get that spook ready!" exclaimed her younger brother.

"And we didn't even know you were there till we peeked in and listened," added John. "Say, but that was bully of you, Ann, not to believe what Stratford said about our breaking in the hotel."

"Of course I knew you didn't!" stated Ann.

"But with that evidence he has he can still make it awfully awkward for us."

"We went to the hotel all right—and dropped those things, but we weren't going to steal anything." Then John explained briefly their experience of Saturday night.

"When we realized that Stratford was goin' to leave—we beat it," said Rollie, "and made our plan to scare those heathens so we could rescue you all."

"But I don't understand how you did it," said Ann, still mystified.

"It was easy enough, once you thought of it," explained John. "And we'll have to hand it to Rollie—it was his idea. I reckon this is one time his book reading helped. Those books Mr. Rajagopal sent Rollie tell all about Hindu superstitions and how the low-caste Hindus believe in all sorts of gods and evil signs, and worship images, like the spirits of water and air and fire. When we saw that the Hindus were going to be left on guard he thought of a plan to simply paralyze them with terror! Gee, but it makes me laugh now to see how scared they really were!"

"You know those bits of stone we found when diggin' the fish pond?" put in Rollie, no longer able to keep silent. "Well, yesterday when John was gettin' those water plants to sell at low tide we noticed how one of 'em was washed clean of muck by the tide. On it was carved the most hideous face—just like a picture of the Hindu Fire Eater in one of my books."

"Yes, go on," said Ann, breathlessly recalling the hideous apparition which the boys had stuck in the shack window. "But let me row a while. You're all out of breath."

They shifted positions cautiously, then Rollie continued, "We beat it for home as fast as we could and dug out that slab. There was some bright red paint left from that table Kit painted and we slapped that on in a hurry, and brought a flash to make it show up."

"But where were Kit and Floss all this time?" asked Ann, wondering. "And why did you go to all that trouble when the sheriff could have rescued us at once?"

"You don't think we were going to tell the cops when Stratford was threatening to send us to jail? What a mess that would be—and the

papers might be full of it for Dad to read about!" exclaimed John.

"And anyhow we were most sure our scheme would work," Rollie added.

"Kit and Floss were all for getting the cops at once," added John. "But we made them promise to wait two hours till we had a chance to try this out."

"I must say it was a clever scheme," Ann praised them whole-heartedly. "Rollie, turn the flash on this spook. I was too scared to see what it was like back there."

"Hit look like de debil!" spoke up Uncle Josiah, who had listened to the boys' story with only occasional grunts and chuckles of approval.

Fumbling in the bottom of the boat Rollie found the slab. He propped it against the seat and turned on the flash.

"Heavens, how horrible!" exclaimed Ann. "No wonder those superstitious Hindus fell down like they were dead!"

A moment later Ann's amazement shifted to Uncle Josiah. Was the old negro superstitious enough to believe it a spook after the boys had made their explanations? No, he was not afraid

of it, for he was bending close, touching the edges and damp paint wonderingly. The gnarled old hand that was thrust into the flash rays was trembling violently.

"Lawdy, can it be true?" he was mumbling, half to himself. He brushed his hand across his eyes and looked again. "Naw, sir, dese old eyes ain't deceibe me—Ah couldn't neber forget dat ugly t'ing." Suddenly he seemed to become aware that the rowers had stopped and were gazing at him in amazement. Slowly he turned to Ann and said, "Let's praise de Lawd, li'l Miss! He don' answer mah prayer an' let dese boys find a piece o' dat old sundial."

CHAPTER XX

THE BRADLEY PEARLS

Uncle Josiah's revelation made the world seem a different place. Weariness, fear, misgivings gave way to hope. Never had Jim Dawkins' boat been rowed so swiftly along that winding inlet, and soon outlines of the trees on the Bradley estate could be seen. Lights shone from the east windows, then Ann distinguished forms moving near the landing. Kit and Floss were evidently watching anxiously for them.

"There're three people at the landing!" exclaimed Rollie.

"Maybe they sent for Judge Carter," said Ann, her spirits dropping a degree. She thought the boys had been wise in keeping the whole affair quiet. She wanted to keep it out of the papers now and away from her father's attention.

Exclamations of relief greeted the approaching boat. In the light of the flash which Kit held Ann saw that the third party was no other than Rajagopal. This was a night of the unex-

pected and no one stopped then to question when he had come or why.

"Oh, my darlin' Ann—I just knew you would be murdered!" burst forth Kit, catching Ann in a bearish hug. "What happened? Tell us all about it."

"There's no time to tell anything now," Ann said, extricating herself. "Part of the sundial's been found and we've got to look for the rest at once. If we can find the pearls maybe the place can be saved yet."

"Do you really mean it, Miss Bradley?" said Rajagopal, surprised out of his accustomed calm. "I have been traveling and investigating for weeks, securing only faintest clues—and return to find you have located the sundial."

"Uncle Josiah says that slab the boys painted to frighten those Hindus was one of the ornamental sides of the pedestal of the sundial," Ann explained.

"How wonderful that their trick worked!" exclaimed Kit. "We want to know all about it."

The boys had already told what they had overheard of Stratford trying to force Ann to make

the sale, and now Ann, herself, quickly related their thrilling escape.

"But let's get to work!" John interrupted her impatiently at last. "No telling how long we'll have to dig before we find the rest of the sundial. To-morrow's not many hours away. We aren't going to sell this place if the pearls are here!"

"You need not worry about the back taxes, Miss Bradley," said Rajagopal. "Had I known you were involved in such complications I would have offered to lend you the money long since. I had a strong feeling, however, that you were in trouble and even as it is, returned sooner than I had planned. The young ladies have told me all that has happened."

"Well, let's stop talking and dig!" exclaimed John, without any intention of being rude. "Somebody get all the lanterns we have, and the spade and hoe."

"Ah'll git some fat li't'ood knots an' stick 'em close to de pon'," said Uncle Josiah, starting up the slope.

They all scattered on various errands, and in a short time John, Rollie and Uncle Josiah waded out into the muck where low tide had left a mere

trickle of water through the canal connecting the fish pond with the inlet.

" It was just about here," said John, swinging the flash until he located a spot near a protruding bit of the shore, overgrown with marsh grass.

They began to dig. Rajagopal, who was still on shore with the girls and Piggles, turned the flash first on one spot of the sunken garden and then on the other. Ann naturally thought he was taking this precaution to prevent the approach of unfriendly intruders.

After a time, he said, " I'm beginning to piece the whole thing together. You remember, I said when I left here weeks ago, Miss Bradley, that I had some very important investigating to do. I went to Washington and with the aid of a friend of my college days, who is well versed in the American history, we searched in the government records until we found the names of the officers and men who occupied this house during the war. From them I hoped to gain some knowledge of the lost sundial. Few of those men were living. I visited three—in scattered parts of your country before I found one who recalled the sundial at all. But his memory was fading very fast. After

much talk he seemed to recall the garden here. He remembered distinctly, however, a terrible storm while they were stationed here—with a—what you call it—cloudburst—yes, that is it. The heavy rain caused a landslide on this slope, sweeping away what was left of flower beds, benches, path—and he said if the sundial was here it must have gone too. John finding that slab proves that it must have been washed into the marsh."

" Oh, then it does seem that we ought to find it! The boys dug up some stepping stones half-buried on the slope and other bits down there in the muck near their pond," said Ann. " And you do really believe that slab is part of the sundial? "

Rajagopal had already examined the broken bit of marble and replied, " I am certain! Only an artisan of my own people could chisel a thing like that in marble. There is a sundial depicting the same god in a royal palace in Burma. Though my great-grandfather was of the royalty he was also an artist."

" Then that Englishman must have been right when he said the scene on the clock was painted by the Indian prince," said Ann.

"Was that why he bought it?" asked Kit in relief.

"It seems so," answered Ann. Then she told them what Stratford had said.

"But the pearls will be ruined if they have been buried in that muck all these years!" said Floss uneasily.

"Even if they are ruined as jewelry they will still serve my purpose," replied Rajagopal quietly. "But the water has never touched them if the pearls were hidden in the same sort of hollow of the pedestal such as I have seen in many sundials in India. But I waste time talking. I must help." He took off his shoes, rolled up his trousers and waded down the ditch.

"I honestly believe I'll blow up with excitement if they don't hurry and find it!" gurgled Kit.

"Well don't!" ordered Floss. "The explosion might attract attention. And don't forget how relieved the Raja was when he found we hadn't yet reported Ann's disappearance to the cops."

"I wonder if this Hindu puzzle is ever going to be straightened out," said Ann. "I hope that

horrid Stratford doesn't notice these lights when he goes back to the shack to make me sign that paper."

"Anybody passing would think those flaring torches are only people out spear-fishing," said Kit.

"I'm afraid they'll never find it—if it's there—till daylight," murmured Ann.

An hour passed and still the two men and two boys worked untiringly in the muck. Floss and Piggles went back to the house and made a huge pot of coffee and a plate of sandwiches.

"I didn't know I could be hungry after all I've been through," said Ann, when she had finished three sandwiches and a cup of coffee. "But I was ravenous! I feel like another person already."

Floss called to the workers in the ditch in vain. "We'll eat something later," replied John. "Let us alone. We're getting hot on the trail!"

"The Raja's just found another carved part of the dial," added Rollie, unconsciously using the abbreviation they had conferred upon their Hindu friend.

At that moment Rajagopal called out in a low,

tense voice, "Here, boys, I've touched something round!"

They all crowded closer. Uncle Josiah held a flaming pine torch high. The girls, too, were unconscious of the oozing marsh muck as they tried to see what was happening. The black mud was hard to remove, for already the tide was beginning to creep up inch by inch into the ditch. If they did not locate the dial soon they would have to wait another twelve hours for low tide and that might be too late.

"Here it is!" cried the Hindu, and his tone held unspeakable joy. "The pedestal itself. Give me a hand here, John! Now, Rollie, pry the spade far down and try to boost it up. There, she's coming!"

Silence followed while they tugged at the heavy stone. But the three of them could not lift it. Ann forgot everything and waded out into the muck with a torch.

"Give me your torch," she said, seizing Uncle Josiah's pine knot. "There, you help, too!"

The brawny old arms were all that were needed to finish the task. The sucking mud that had hugged the old pedestal in its embrace for more

than a half century yielded up its treasure. Rajagopal and John now stumbled to the green bank with it. Flaring torches and lanterns showed an object black with slime and mud, but the shape of the sundial pedestal was unmistakable. The gnomon had long since been snapped off, but the flat circle of the dial face was unbroken.

They were all still gaping at it in wonder when Piggles appeared with a scrubbing brush, soap and a bucket of water. "Ah knowed it would be all filthy," she said.

Everybody laughed but Rajagopal, who said, "The little girl has not a bad idea. Cleaning away the slime will make it easier to get inside."

"And you think the pearls may be hidden inside that stone?" asked Ann, wide-eyed.

Piggles was already on her knees scrubbing away at the stone.

Rajagopal leaned over, pointing to parts of the dial as he talked. "The ones I have seen under construction in India have a small hollow, not much larger than your two cupped palms in the center on the pedestal at the top. Grooves are cut around this hollow. Then this flat, top

slab of marble on which the dial face is marked is screwed into place."

"But why do they make that little hollow in the pedestal?" asked Kit.

Rajagopal shrugged his shoulders and made an outward, upward motion of his palms. "I know not," he replied, "unless it is the relic of some ancient custom when gifts were placed under the dial face for the sun god."

"But can we get the dial face off if it is screwed on—and has been standing that way all these years?" asked Floss uneasily.

"I hope so—with chisels and hammers."

At these words Kit, Floss and Rollie hurried to the house in search of implements. Then the hammering and chiseling began. But progress was only made in fractions of inches. Ann thought she would go mad with suspense. John had not patience to stand by and see Rollie help Rajagopal. Floss suggested sending for the town stone-cutter, but the Hindu plead with them to be patient, and preserve the utmost secrecy about the whole proceeding, as they had promised him they would do. Gray light trembled across the eastern marshes. Rosy tints were

flooding sky and water when suddenly Rajagopal cried out for joy, "There—at last!"

Ann turned from the dawn-light just in time to see the Hindu deal a powerful blow on his chisel and the dial face fall suddenly away from the pedestal. She sprang closer. There in the dry hollow of the stone lay a small teak-wood box. No one spoke. Awe filled every heart, now that they had come to the end of the long search. No one touched the box.

Finally Ann gasped, "Do you really think it is the pearls?" she asked without taking her eyes from the hollow.

"They are yours," said Rajagopal. "It is your privilege to remove them."

Ann's hands were cold as ice as she reached for the box. Pressing a little clasp she lifted the lid. There on a rose-colored cushion lay the most beautiful string of pink-tinted pearls she had ever seen.

"Jimminy gee!" exploded Rollie. "If it ain't the old pearls! I told you we'd find 'em some day!"

"Are they—are they really the pearls you—

you wanted?" asked Ann, extending the box toward their Hindu friend.

Rajagopal lifted the string of shimmering pearls. The Hindu examined the gold clasp. A sigh of relief escaped him. Pure joy lit up his face.

"They are the royal pearls of the house of Bengalin. See carved on the clasp, the serpent circle with the triangle inside? Even the teakwood box bears the family symbol."

Rajagopal fondled the beautiful string of pearls with slim fingers. "You young people have done a great thing in bringing about this recovery," he told them in a soft, quiet voice. "What I shall tell you I must ask you to keep secret until I am gone. For many generations this string of pearls has been in the royal family of Bengalin in India. When the heir marries they have always been presented to his wife."

"Then the couple that my great-grandfather took in must have been a prince and princess!" said Ann wonderingly.

"They were—but the prince's father drove him from the kingdom because he and his wife embraced Christianity. You know the story of their

life here and how Captain Bradley came by the pearls—and that my family has been in this country ever since. When I was in college my father visited India hoping he might return there to live. To his surprise no one would believe he was a descendant of that royal Rajagopal who had been exiled. A cousin had taken over the rulership, and under his bad management the region has fallen into a terrible condition. An influential leader of the dissatisfied people assured my father that the rulership would be returned to the rightful line—our line, could he present absolute proof of our rights. He asked for the royal pearls worn by the Princess Chandra when she went away. That's why for ten years we have done everything in our power to locate your family and find these pearls, Miss Bradley."

"And you really believe those pearls will help restore your family to its rightful place?" asked Ann wonderingly.

"I am certain of it! My people are very superstitious—are turned easily by such a proof of heirship. We are wealthy, my father and I. We can do much to restore our kingdom to its former grandeur. With our education we can

establish schools for the ignorant people, and feed the hungry."

"But why was Mr. Stratford so intent on getting possession of this property and preventing your finding the pearls?" asked Floss.

"That would have kept me from returning to the kingdom. He represents a corporation that has been keeping the heel of commercial gain ground into our poor people. They are engaged in the pearling industry. Many emaciated divers die in the water from starvation and overwork, while such men as this Stratford profit by their suffering. The two low natives, Situ and Chantu, who guarded Miss Bradley are the scum with which he deals. Such as those poor creatures we hope to lift from degradation."

Ann thought she had never seen a more beautiful and spiritual face than Rajagopal's. The rising sun touched it with a golden light, as he told of his plans. They continued to ply him with questions as they took turns examining the priceless treasure.

Finally Rajagopal said, "Let us not talk longer now. We must send for Judge Carter and Mr. Ingram, the jeweler. I want the sale

of the pearls made legal and correct. The boys can carry notes from you, Miss Bradley, urgently asking them to come—at once."

They were turning toward the house when Ann said uneasily, "But suppose Stratford carries out his threat and has them arrested. I imagine he is back in town by this time."

"He will not dare—after his attempt last night failed. That threat was undoubtedly to intimidate you into turning the pearls over to him."

An hour later Ann's family, Rajagopal, Judge Carter and Mr. Ingram were gathered in the parlor. Ann could hardly believe her ears when Mr. Ingram stated the value of the pearls. Why that would be enough to keep them all comfortably for life! In a quick flash she saw the Bradley place restored to its former beauty, and her stepfather with months of leisure in which to recover. Her musical career would no longer be a vague dream. She could pay up all her debts to the girls—make everyone she loved happy! It seemed too wonderful to be true!

Rajagopal seemed to think the jeweler's estimate not high enough and said at once, "I shall

be most glad to make my check larger than that. Judge Carter will kindly wire to my New York bank to assure himself that my check is good, for I wish to leave at once by airplane. Also I must ask Mr. Ingram and Judge Carter to speak nothing of what has happened here until I am gone. Stratford would do all in his power to keep me from getting away with the pearls if he knew I had recovered them."

"Stratford will not interfere, I feel certain," said Judge Carter, who was still ignorant of the part the Englishman had played in his client's affairs. "He was packing trunks and bags into his car as I came down Bay Street. I have a feeling he was being forced to leave town."

"When I am gone, Miss Bradley will tell you all that occurred last night," said Rajagopal. "But Stratford has laid himself liable to arrest for kidnapping. It behooves him to flee!"

The kindly Judge Carter saw that the sale of the pearls was handled legally. By ten o'clock that morning Ann had deposited her check in the bank and at once paid four hundred and twenty-six dollars for back taxes on the estate.

When all legal matters were adjusted Raja-

gopal returned to the house with Ann to bid good-bye to the young people. "In twenty-four hours I hope to be aboard a steamer bound for India," he told them. "I shall write you how we succeed with our plans. They cannot fail now, I am sure. And perhaps some happy day when you are all a little older you will come to visit us at our palace."

A half hour later the roar of a plane's motor was heard above Oakdale. The young people, watching from the lawn, knew that Rajagopal was winging his way into a bright future. Gradually the plane faded to a little speck against the sheen of the sunny sky. Ann's face was reflecting some of the brightness into which she had been gazing as she turned to her brothers and friends.

"Now I'm going to send a long, expensive wire to Mother and Dad, and beg them to come to Oakdale so they can hear from our own lips what has happened. It would sound like a fairy tale if I merely wrote them all we've been through to find the Bradley pearls."

THE END

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